

# **Impoliteness in Cyberspace: Personally Abusive Reader Responses in Online News Media**

Thesis

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***For Tim***





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# Table of contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	5
<i>List of figures and tables</i>	11
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>15</b>
1.1. Personal abuse in reader responses	15
1.2. Motivation to study impoliteness in online reader responses	16
1.3. The research questions	20
1.4. Outline of the study	22
<b>2. THEORETICAL SCOPE: (ONLINE) MASS MEDIA COMMUNICATION</b>	<b>27</b>
2.1. Defining “medium” and “media”: Multi-layered concepts	27
2.2. Defining “old” and “new” media	28
2.3. Defining “old” and “new” forms of mass media communication	29
2.4. Audience involvement, interaction and interactivity in the online news media	35
2.4.1. Audience involvement, speaking rights and institutional control	50
2.4.2. The news media’s reasons for audience involvement	53
2.5. Types of written communication modes with talk-back function in the online news media	54
2.5.1. Online reader responses	55
2.5.2. “Digital” letters to the editor	59
2.5.3. Forum discussion boards	63
2.5.4. Integrated news blogs	67
2.5.5. Online opinion polls	69
<b>3. THEORETICAL SCOPE: IMPOLITENESS (ONLINE)</b>	<b>73</b>
3.1. Impoliteness and politeness	73
3.2. Defining impoliteness: A challenge in itself	75
3.3. First order and second order approaches	81
3.4. Face as a unit of investigation	84
3.5. Intention as a unit of investigation	93
3.6. Impoliteness and inappropriateness	97
3.7. Impoliteness as relational work	99
3.8. Contextual, medium and person-related factors in the study of impoliteness in reader responses	101
3.8.1. The rationale for this methodological approach	102
3.8.2. The activity type and Community of Practice	107
3.8.3. The situational norms: Person-related norms, netiquette and moderation rules	111
3.8.4. Meta-pragmatic evaluations of impoliteness by participants	116
3.8.5. Person-related features: Roles, rights and power	119

3.8.6.	Person-related features: Historical relations	120
3.8.7.	Person-related features: Personality and socio-demographics	122
3.8.8.	Medium-related features: (Pseudo)anonymity and the public, polylogue setting	123
<b>3.9.</b>	<b>Universal (im)politeness and inherent (im)politeness: Concepts of the past?</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>3.10.</b>	<b>Related forms of conflictive and offensive behaviour in CMC</b>	<b>131</b>
3.10.1.	Flaming	132
3.10.2.	Trolling	147
3.10.3.	Cyberstalking, online harassment, cyberbullying and happy slapping	152
3.10.4.	Possible motives and causes of conflictive and offensive behaviour online	154
<b>4.</b>	<b><i>IMPOLITENESS IN PRACTICE: ANALYSIS PROPER</i></b>	<b>161</b>
<b>4.1.</b>	<b>The data set</b>	<b>161</b>
4.1.1.	The XML coding scheme and the database	168
4.1.2.	Advantages and limitations of the data set	170
4.1.3.	Ethical considerations on data collection in CMC	173
<b>4.2.</b>	<b>Introduction: The analysis dimensions</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>4.3.</b>	<b>The participation framework and communicative situation in reader responses: Interactants' discursive roles and constellations</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>4.4.</b>	<b>The sequential discourse dynamics and strategies in conflictive exchanges</b>	<b>189</b>
4.4.1.	The conflict trigger and first offending personal attack	193
4.4.2.	Do not respond: Silence	197
4.4.3.	Defensive response: An overview of possible strategies	199
4.4.3.1.	Defensive response: Ignore your discussion partner	200
4.4.3.2.	Defensive response: Accept the responsibility for a face attack	201
4.4.4.	Offensive response: Four types of counter attacks	204
4.4.4.1.	Offensive response: Counter attack to defend one's own face	206
4.4.4.2.	Offensive response: Counter attack to defend the face of another commentator	207
4.4.4.3.	Offensive response: Counter attack to defend the face of the journalist	208
4.4.4.4.	Offensive response: Counter attack to defend the face of a key actor	209
4.4.5.	End of conflict: An overview of strategies	210
4.4.5.1.	Withdraw to mark the end of a conflict	211
4.4.5.2.	Compromise to end a conflict	213
4.4.5.3.	Intervention of a third party to end a conflict	214
4.4.5.4.	Submission to opponent and stand-off to end a conflict	217
4.4.6.	Results and discussion of the sequential response strategies in a conflict	218
<b>4.5.</b>	<b>The reactive-interactive sequential patterns in conflictive exchanges: Introduction and methodology</b>	<b>224</b>
4.5.1.	Results and discussion of the reactive-interactive sequential patterns in conflictive exchanges	226
<b>4.6.</b>	<b>Personal attacks: Introduction, method and analytical categories</b>	<b>230</b>
4.6.1.	You are morally, ethically or socially deficient	235
4.6.2.	Your perception is distorted	237
4.6.3.	Your cognitive capabilities are deficient	240
4.6.4.	Your prudential judgement is deficient	241
4.6.5.	You are not truthful	243
4.6.6.	You are inconsistent	244

4.6.7.	You are biased _____	246
4.6.8.	You are a joke (condescend and ridicule) _____	247
4.6.9.	You lack discussion manners _____	249
4.6.10.	You are not worth being listened to _____	251
4.6.11.	Watch it! (threats and warnings) _____	253
4.6.12.	Unclassified moderated attacks _____	254
4.6.13.	Results and discussion of personal attacks _____	255
4.6.14.	Express Online: A special case _____	263
<b>4.7.</b>	<b>Swearing in personal attacks _____</b>	<b>268</b>
4.7.1.	Results and discussion of swearing _____	275
<b>4.8.</b>	<b>Name-calling in personal attacks _____</b>	<b>282</b>
4.8.1.	Results and discussion for name-calling _____	284
4.8.2.	Case study: Name-calling of key actors on Sun Online _____	291
<b>5.</b>	<b><i>CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK</i> _____</b>	<b>295</b>
<b>5.1.</b>	<b>The research questions and key arguments revisited _____</b>	<b>295</b>
<b>5.2.</b>	<b>Relevance of my research for the field of impoliteness studies _____</b>	<b>308</b>
<b>5.3.</b>	<b>The limitations to the study _____</b>	<b>308</b>
<b>5.4.</b>	<b>Areas of future research _____</b>	<b>309</b>
	<b><i>BIBLIOGRAPHY</i> _____</b>	<b>313</b>
	<b><i>APPENDIX</i> _____</b>	<b>337</b>



## List of figures and tables

### CHAPTER 2

- Figure 1.** Model of interactive mass communication online (Janoschka 2004:98)
- Figure 2.** *Guardian Online*: Newspaper contributor answers readers' questions
- Figure 3.** *Guardian Online*: Range of community features with audience involvement
- Figure 4.** *Guardian Online*: "Contribute to regular features and columns"
- Figure 5.** *Sun Online*: Sell your story
- Figure 6.** *Mail Online*: Report from the field
- Figure 7.** *Guardian Online*: "Send us your pictures"
- Figure 8.** The three types of communication (Rafaeli & Sudweeks 1997)
- Figure 9.** *Guardian Online*: Reactive interaction between user and journalist
- Figure 10.** *Guardian Online*: Reactive interaction between journalist and users
- Figure 11.** *BBC Online*: Customize your website
- Figure 12.** *BBC Online*: Example 1 for a customized landing page
- Figure 13.** *BBC Online*: Example 2 for a customized landing page
- Figure 14.** *Mail Online*: Reader response form online
- Figure 15.** *Guardian Online*: Reader response form online
- Figure 16.** *Express Online*: Dialogic interaction between users
- Figure 17.** *Guardian Online*: Time lag between reader responses
- Figure 18.** *Guardian Online*: Simultaneous publication of reader responses
- Figure 19.** *Mail Online*: "Report abuse" and "Click to rate" comments
- Figure 20.** *Telegraph Online*: "Digitalized" archive of letters to the editor
- Figure 21.** *Daily Telegraph Australia Online*: Online form for letters to the editor
- Figure 22.** *Guardian Online*: Letter archive
- Figure 23.** *Telegraph Online*: Letter to the editor with integrated reader response function
- Figure 24.** Submit a comment to the *Guardian Online* Talkboard
- Figure 25.** Structure of the *Guardian Online* Talkboard
- Figure 26.** *Guardian Online* Talkboard: Layout and functionality of a Talkboard discussion thread

**Figure 27.** *Guardian Online* Talkboard: “Outline” of the discussion thread “Fuck it! Let’s have a revolution!!”

**Figure 28.** *Guardian Online*: Personal blog of a *Guardian* editor

**Figure 29.** *Telegraph Online*: Personal blog of a sports celebrity

**Figure 30.** *Guardian Online*: Book blog run by a number of individuals

**Figure 31.** *Express Online*: Online poll landing page

**Figure 32.** *Sun Online*: Online poll: “Approve of TV show celeb guest cameos?” with integrated reader response function

**Figure 33.** *Guardian Online*: Online poll with integrated reader response function

**Table 1.** Central media concepts

**Table 2.** Key elements in traditional mass media communication (Janoschka 2004:94)

**Table 3.** “Interactive mass communication” (Janoschka 2004:100)

**Table 4.** Degrees of interactivity in mass media communication (Schultz 2000:211)

### CHAPTER 3

**Table 5.** Analysis categories in early studies on flaming

**Table 6.** Variables that may influence conflictive behaviour online

### CHAPTER 4

**Figure 34.** Journalist profile on *Guardian Online*

**Figure 35.** *Guardian Online*: “Article history” to add transparency to ever-changing web content

**Figure 37.** *Guardian Online*: Deleted user response

**Figure 38.** The reader response participation framework with interchangeable discursual roles

**Figure 39.** Intended and actual recipients in reader responses

**Figure 40.** Interaction between a commentator and a moderator

**Figure 41.** Interaction between a commentator and a moderator

**Figure 42.** The outer and inner communicative frames in reader responses



**Figure 43.** Moderated discussion thread on *Guardian Online*

**Figure 44.** Sequential patterns of impolite conflictive exchanges

**Table 7.** The core data set characteristics

**Table 8.** The extended data set for the sequential discourse dynamics in impolite conflictive exchanges

**Table 9.** The extended data set for unique user identification across the news sites

**Table 10.** Topic split per newspaper

**Table 11.** Key characteristics of the reader response function across news sites

**Table 12.** Sequential discourse strategies in an impolite conflict

**Table 13.** Offensive responses: Four types of counter attacks

**Table 14.** Sequential response strategies in reader responses

**Table 15.** The data set for conflict resolution strategies

**Table 16.** Results for the sequential discourse patterns of conflictive exchanges

**Table 17.** *Express Online*: Results for the sequential discourse patterns of conflictive exchanges

**Table 18.** Unique commentators per newspaper

**Table 19.** Average production time for a discussion thread

**Table 20.** Types of personal attacks overall

**Table 21.** Personal attacks across newspapers

**Table 22.** Distribution of personal attacks (PAs) across comments and newspapers

**Table 23.** Personal attacks (PAs) per topic and newspaper

**Table 24.** Personal attacks against co-commentators

**Table 25.** Personal attacks against journalists and/or the newspaper

**Table 26.** Distribution of personal attacks (PAs) on commentators vs. journalists and/or the newspaper across newspapers

**Table 27.** *Express Online*: Distribution of personal attacks (PAs) across users and comments

**Table 28.** *Express Online*: Personal attacks per unique user

**Table 29.** Swearing per newspaper

**Table 30.** Distribution of swearing across comments with personal attacks (PAs)

**Table 31.** Types of swearing in personal attacks

**Table 32.** Distribution of name-calling across newspapers

**Table 33.** Name-calling frequencies in personal attacks

**Table 34.** Topic areas related to name-calling in personal attacks

**Table 35.** Name-calling of key actors on *Sun Online*: Kathie Price and Alex Reid

## **APPENDIX**

**Table 36.** Sample of a tagged reader response in the XML database

**Table 37.** Levels of analysis: 0 to 3

**Table 38.** Levels of analysis: 4 to 7

**Table 39.** Data set: Source details for the up-market newspapers *Guardian Online* and *Telegraph Online*

**Table 40.** Data set: Source details for the mid-market newspapers *Express Online* and *Mail Online*

**Table 41.** Data set: Source details for the down-market newspaper *Sun Online*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Personal abuse in reader responses<sup>1</sup>

The German journalist Jan Fleischhauer is one of many journalists who recently had to learn that giving readers the chance to participate online in news discussions does not only open the door for a lively and colourful debate with his readership but may also make him the target of their rants. Here are a few examples of outbursts by users who do not seem to appreciate Fleischhauer's work (Polce-Lynch et al. 2001):

1. *Fleischhauer leidet an Hirnschmelze* [F. suffers from a melting brain]
2. *Der Mann ist schlicht krank* [The man is simply sick]
3. *einfach nur ekelhaft* [just disgusting]
4. *in seiner Persönlichkeit schwer gestört* [severely disturbed in his personality].<sup>2</sup>

While Fleischhauer is grateful for an eager discussion of his columns (sometimes up to 800 written user comments are triggered by some of his articles), he is, as he admits, vexed by the readers' rude behaviour. That this phenomenon does not only exist in the German news world but is also found in the British media is evident in the publication of articles such as "How the internet created an age of rage" (Adams 2011) on *Guardian Online*. The author of the article notes: "The worldwide web has made critics of us all. But with commentators able to hide behind a cloak of anonymity, the blog and chat room have become forums for hatred and bile" (Adams 2011). *Guardian Online* journalist Andrew Brown (2010) also remarks after the publication of one of his articles on the recent Catholic sex scandals that "the comments [would] have been much more interesting and pleasurable to read if they weren't full of expressions of disgust and accusations of complicity in paedophilia or its cover-up." Therefore he fully supports the newspaper's<sup>3</sup> moderation guidelines to hold the amount of personal abuse at bay. As Brown (2010) argues, "because it's much harder to think clearly when you're being called an ignorant idiot and the accomplice of criminals." However, moderation rules not only exist for the protection

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, I will use the terms reader response and user comment/contribution interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Translations in brackets are mine.

<sup>3</sup> Whenever I use the term "newspaper", I use it as an inclusive concept that may refer to either the online or print edition of a media outlet.

of the journalists but also for the sake of the readership and well-mannered commentators who may fall prey to the personal abuse of their co-commentators as this study will demonstrate. Given the sheer amount of daily user contributions, moderation may often only apply to the more extreme cases or in many cases is simply missed. Personally abusive reader responses, as analysed in this study, thus provide a wealth of natural data that is of most interest to any linguist working in the field of impoliteness. Not only do user comments offer an exciting opportunity to further our conceptual understanding of impoliteness but they also ask us to scrutinize and broaden our methodological perspective to be able to capture impoliteness in a novel context where participants do not interact face-to-face but via the written word in a (pseudo)anonymous, public and physically distant setting with a potentially vast readership.

## **1.2. Motivation to study impoliteness in online reader responses**

Impoliteness has been extensively researched in simultaneous and physical speaker interactions. There is an abundance of research on game/talk shows and reality TV.<sup>4</sup> Research has also focused on panel discussions, political debates, workplace interactions and academic counselling discourse for offensive linguistic behaviour.<sup>5</sup> In the media, scholars have analysed news interviews and radio phone-ins for impoliteness.<sup>6</sup> In the legal sphere, small claims and courtroom discourse as well as police-citizen interactions have been the focus.<sup>7</sup> While there is thus a significant spectrum of studies on impoliteness in the different spheres of the offline world available, the study of impoliteness in computer-mediated communication (CMC) is still an under-explored research area.

Admittedly, linguistic studies on CMC in general are a much younger field of research (see Androutsopoulos 2006; Bittner 2003; and Locher 2010 on the historical development of a linguistic perspective on CMC studies). Nevertheless, the study of

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. studies by Bousfield (2008a, 2008b); Culpeper et al. (2003); Culpeper (2005); Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. (2010); and Lorenzo-Dus (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. studies by García-Pastor (2008); House (2010); Kienpointner (2008); Mullany (2008); Schnurr et al. (2008); and Stadler (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. studies by Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009); Hutchby (2008); Locher & Watts (2008); and Piirainen-Marsh (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. studies by Ainsworth (2008); and Hutchby (2008).

impoliteness (even more so than the study of politeness) in physically distant computer-mediated speaker interactions has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves (cf. Haugh 2008:8; Locher 2010:3).

Only very recently has there been an increased scholarly effort to apply impoliteness models and taxonomies to a broader range of CMC settings. Examples of “early” empirical work on impoliteness include studies with a focus on current affairs discourse online and the negotiation of norms via bulletin boards (Graham 2007, 2008; Angouri & Tseliga 2010; Nishimura 2010). Impoliteness in academic discourse via e-mail (Haugh 2010) and workplace discourse via instant messaging (Darics 2010) have also been investigated lately. Two international conferences, Linguistic Impoliteness and Rudeness II (LIAR II) in 2009 and the Politeness Symposium in 2010, also show that a shift has taken place. Numerous conference papers focused specifically on impoliteness in a broad range of CMC modes including customer complaints on the eBay feedback forum (Köhl 2009), discussion threads on YouTube fora, blog contributions on a site for homosexuals (Rudolf von Rohr 2010), company and university e-mail exchanges (Danielewicz-Betz 2010; Fletcher 2010), classroom interactions via chat (Vandergriff 2010) and contributions on diary blogs (Bolander 2010) as well as Facebook (Duchaj & Ntahirageza 2010). This study thus wants to form part of a growing body of research on impoliteness in physically distant computer-mediated speaker interactions.

Secondly, even though there are successful first attempts to investigate data from a variety of CMC modes for impoliteness by now, reader response sections on news sites have not been the focus of many linguistic investigations yet. These Internet-based reader responses are a form of interactive audience participation and successor to traditional forms such as letters to the editor and speakers’ corners (cf. also Baron 2008:100). This mode of communication allows (pseudo)anonymous users to publicly share their personal views and discuss and debate newspaper content with a potentially vast readership (Dürscheid 2007:5). Only outside the field of linguistics in communication, social and media studies, early accounts to describe the nature of such talk-back modes exist, and first explanations are offered to understand the occurrence of offensive behaviour in this setting. From a linguistic perspective, an exception is Upadhyay’s research (2010) on user comment debates surrounding the 2008 presidential election on three US news media sources. Kohn & Neiger’s (2007) study of commentaries on an Israeli newspaper website, next to Langlotz & Locher

(2010) as well as Bös & Kleinke's (2010) work on British and German news media sites (*Mail Online*, *BBC Online*, *Spiegel Online*) form an exception as well. It is therefore the aim of this study to offer a substantial linguistic contribution to further our understanding of this specific form of online communication and more specifically describe personal abuse in reader response interactions from an impoliteness perspective.

Despite low scholarly output, reader responses are an attractive communication mode for the study of impoliteness since they are interactive forms of public debates where people – with sometimes strongly differing point of views – converse, disagree and criticize each other. Conflictive talk appears to be an essential feature of this type of discourse, and researchers can anticipate finding impolite-rich communicative interactions in this setting. Reader responses can thus be added to the set of discourses where, as Kienpointner (2008:244) notes, “impoliteness is even the normal and expectable communicative behaviour.” While expectability does not automatically imply acceptability, Kienpointner cites the following other examples of such types of discourse:

[...] army recruit training [...] cross-examination within courtroom interaction [...] disputes between traffic wardens (“clampers”) and owners of illegally parked cars [...] “exploitative” chat shows and quiz shows [...] political conflicts between political leaders, parties and their followers [...].<sup>8</sup>

Thirdly, the study of reader responses offers an opportunity to explore the conceptual links between flaming, trolling and impoliteness in mediated contexts. Flaming and trolling have indeed a longer (though not necessarily linguistic) research tradition<sup>9</sup> but have largely been treated as separate fields of research (for an exception see Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000). Culpeper's (2009) recent compilation of research related to impoliteness lists 330 entries and includes only one entry that explicitly mentions flaming as part of the analysts' research foci. That it is worth paying attention to flaming and trolling to further our understanding of impoliteness in

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. studies by Bolívar & Murillo-Medrano (2005); Culpeper (1996, 2005); Culpeper et al. (2003); Harris (2001); Kienpointner (2003); and (Lakoff 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. studies by Alonzo & Aiken (2004); Herring (1994); Sproull & Kiesler (1986); Kayany (1998); Jucker & Taavitsainen (2000); Turnage (2007); Harrison (2007); and Hardaker (2010).

computer-mediated research is also underlined by Haugh (2010), Danet (forthcoming) and Hardaker (2010).

From a methodological perspective, reader responses are also attractive because they offer a new opportunity to researchers to capture and analyse written (and at the same time conceptually oral) realisations of impoliteness. While users have to post their comment in a medial graphic mode (basically by means of e-mail technology), the functionality of reader responses allows for a dialogic interaction (Dürscheid 2005). Though this form of communication is time-delayed (asynchronous) and distant, a user can, similar to face-to-face communication, engage in dialogic forms of conversation. For example, they can counter a previously posted offensive comment, challenge a participant by asking further questions or initiate a new subtopic of discussion (within the realm of the article topic at hand). In terms of register, they are also more immediate containing typical features of spoken language than for instance the traditional letters to the editor (Dürscheid 2003; Koch & Oesterreicher 2007; Landert & Jucker 2011). They may include spoken features of expressions (verbalizations) such as interjections, incomplete sentences and informal expressions (Dürscheid 2003:52). This study thus also offers an opportunity to investigate a hybrid form of language use and unique ways of verbalizing impoliteness.

From a discourse perspective, reader responses were also chosen for this study because they allow for an analysis of the dynamics of impoliteness across longer passages of discourse (cf. Culpeper 2011:7; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010b:537; Locher & Bousfield 2008:5; and Mills 2011:29–30). One can investigate how an impolite conflict unfolds among interactants i.e. how an argument is sparked, develops and eventually may get resolved or simply trickles away. Such a study can be done across one discussion thread<sup>10</sup> or even across a longer period of time across various discussion threads (e.g. former conflicts among participants may be rekindled in new discussion threads). Since most online newspapers keep a public repository of archived reader responses, access to data is easy and allows analysts to look at user behaviour across time. This circumstance also gives one the chance to identify individualistic patterns in impolite communication.

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<sup>10</sup> The chronological string of user comments related to a single article is referred to as discussion thread.

From a normative perspective, against the backdrop of newspaper house rules, reader responses were also chosen for this study because they provide the opportunity to investigate norm negotiations. They thus give researchers the chance to complement a second order impoliteness approach, as taken in this particular study, with first order evaluations by the participants themselves (i.e. the laypeople perspective). Users' meta-comments on the linguistic behaviour of other interactants give insight in what is rated as impolite and offensive by members of the Community of Practice (CofP) themselves (Locher & Watts 2008). Haugh (2010) goes a step further arguing that "metapragmatics of impoliteness" should be considered a crucial aspect of any theoretical approach to impoliteness due to the default "inherent variability and argumentativity" of perceptions of impoliteness.

Last but not least, the study of impoliteness in reader responses also provides the opportunity to study the influence of the technical medium and situational parameters on the language behaviour of participants (cf. Dürscheid 2004, 2005, 2007; Graham 2008; Herring 2007) and to re-evaluate the usefulness of traditional face-to-face impoliteness taxonomies for online communication. Asynchrony, anonymity and the public setting are just three features of reader responses that do not only influence the linguistic behaviour of users but also affect evaluations of impoliteness in this setting.

### **1.3. The research questions**

The overall aim of this study is to investigate the communicative behaviour of participants in public computer-mediated discourse and more specifically provide a framework to conceptualize and describe impolite exchanges among users in the written reader response sections of five British online newspapers. The data analysed in this study are user comments by readership members in response to newspaper articles of the following five online British newspapers: *Express Online*, *Guardian Online*, *Mail Online*, *Sun Online*, and *Telegraph Online*.<sup>11</sup> Following theoretical/methodological and empirical research questions are central to this study:

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<sup>11</sup> See section 4.1 for a terminological differentiation between the online and print editions of the newspapers in this study.



The theoretical/methodological research questions:

1. *Where can we situate the interactively designed reader responses in a mass media context?*
2. *What is the interplay between politeness and impoliteness?*
3. *How can impoliteness be defined?*
4. *What can be gained from a first order or second order approach?*
5. *What role and explanatory strength has the concept of face in impoliteness studies?*
6. *What role and explanatory strength has the concept of intention in impoliteness studies?*
7. *How useful is the concept of inappropriateness in a study of impoliteness?*
8. *How can impoliteness be understood as a relational phenomenon?*
9. *Which contextual, medium and person-related factors play a role for the interpretation of impoliteness in CMC?*
10. *Should we reject the concepts of universal and inherent impoliteness as notions of the past?*
11. *Is it possible to differentiate personally abusive impoliteness from other forms of conflictive and offensive behaviour online?*

The empirical research questions:

12. *What is the participation framework and communicative situation in reader responses?*
13. *Which sequential interactive structures are characteristic of impolite conflictive exchanges?*
14. *How can we identify and conceptualize (potentially) impolite linguistic realizations of users in online reader responses?*
15. *How do users themselves define what actually constitutes inappropriate behaviour?*
16. *Do individual users stand out in their negative communicative behaviour and if yes, how is this to be interpreted?*
17. *How are the linguistic devices swearing and name-calling used in personally abusive impolite reader responses?*

An exploration of the research questions above forms the core of this study. It is hoped that answers to these matters contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics and dimensions of the linguistic phenomenon of impoliteness in general and more specifically its operation in a computer-mediated setting.

#### **1.4. Outline of the study**

The study is divided into a theoretical and an empirical section. Since I am interested in the linguistic behaviour of participants in the context of online news media, the first centrepiece of the theoretical section, in chapter 2., will concentrate on a discussion of the key characteristics of the mass media to set the scene. The “old” versus “new” forms of mass communication will be investigated, and innovative features related to online mass communication will be discussed. Especially the changing role of the news consumer (i.e. user) as more active participant in the news media cycle is investigated. Admittedly, audience involvement in mass media communication is not a completely new invention. Radio-phone-ins, letters to the editors or opinion polls have been around for decades. Nevertheless, the number of talk-back functions for members of the audience have reached unprecedented dimensions in an online mass communication context. These new options of interaction and interactivity between news producer and users are discussed. Also the concepts of personalisation and customization of news media content will be outlined. Part of the discussion will also focus on possible reasons why online news media are eager to include audience members as active participants in the news cycle. However, I will also ask the question whether these innovative forms of audience involvement and more speaking rights for users offered by newspapers truly open the door for an interactive exchange between the two parties. I will close the chapter with an overview of the different functional properties of talk-back modes commonly available on institutional news media sites. This will allow me to situate reader responses among other forms of audience involvement including digital letters to the editor, forum discussion boards, integrated blogs and opinion polls.

Chapter 3. provides the theoretical groundwork on the interdisciplinary concept of impoliteness. I will first outline the link between politeness and impoliteness as linguistic concepts and demonstrate that they cannot be viewed as binary opposites. In the following, I am going to introduce a number of the most recent efforts to define the elusive concept of impoliteness. This discussion is meant to demonstrate that

scholars have yet to agree on the very notion of impoliteness itself. To close this section, I will provide my own definition of the concept.

The disagreement among researchers is also partly based on the different theoretical camps they belong to. We can broadly distinguish between first order and second order theorists. I will first outline the core differences between the two approaches. However, as post-modern analysts demonstrate, I will also show that a strict distinction is not always possible nor necessarily desirable. These scholars successfully combine elements of both theoretical viewpoints in their methodological approaches to analyse (im)politeness. In the following, the concept of face as the most important means to grasp (im)politeness to date is explored. The development of the concept as binary category in Brown & Levinson's view ([1978]1987) up to Spencer-Oatey's (e.g. 2000, 2008) multi-dimensional re-conceptualisation of the notion are discussed, and the question is raised whether the concept of face suffices to conceptualize (im)politeness. Next to the notion of face, speaker intention as a unit of investigation has a long tradition in the identification and conceptualisation of (im)politeness. This section will explore whether speaker intention is ultimately an essential factor for a communicative act to be evaluated as impolite.

The next sections will focus on answering two further important questions. Namely, what role should the concept of inappropriateness play in our understanding of impoliteness and how can impoliteness be understood as a relational phenomenon? Subsequently, I will explain a number of contextual, medium and person-related factors that I consider of importance for a sound interpretation of the linguistic performances of users in my data set and my theoretical understanding of impoliteness. Among other factors, the activity type, moderation and netiquette norms as well as reader-responses' (pseudo)anonymous and public nature will be explored. Furthermore, I will review whether the concepts of inherent and universal (im)politeness still have a place in post-modern (im)politeness research.

To conclude the theoretical chapter on impoliteness I will situate impolite linguistic behaviour as observed in reader responses among other forms of conflictive and offensive behaviour online. Online harassment, cyberbullying, cyberstalking and happy slapping are seen as the most destructive types of aggressive social behaviour in a computer-mediated environment (also because of their link to negative physical impact on the "offline" life of people). Flaming and trolling, also two well-researched CMC phenomena, are restricted to verbal aggression and are thus arguably less

excessive forms of negative behaviour online. In the following, it will be discussed how the two phenomena theoretically relate to the concept of impoliteness in an online context. I will then also briefly reflect on the most frequently named motives and causes in literature for conflictive and offensive behaviour online. Naturally, within the limits of linguistic research, this account will remain speculative. However, by drawing upon assessments from experts in the field of sociology and psychology a comprehensive description of the social drivers is offered that could hypothetically be responsible for uninhibited behaviour online. I will also ask whether the degree and frequency of such negative behaviour is really unique to and triggered by technically determined factors in CMC as is often claimed in the literature.

In chapter 4. I will move on to the analysis proper. The empirical section starts off with a detailed description of my data set of reader responses. I will present my method of data collection and choice of reader responses for my corpus. I will also present the XML coding scheme which was used to store, tag and analyse the data. After that, challenges and limitations of my data set will be discussed. Easy access to a rich pool of naturally occurring linguistic data, the fluidity and non-transparency of the web will be discussed and how these challenges affect the reliability of the data for the work of researchers. Given that newspapers also work with different technical frameworks to run their sites, researchers have to face various challenges to capture and store Internet data from different online news media. These difficulties will be evaluated and suggestions to help resolving such issues will complete the data section.

Important ethical aspects regarding the collection and analysis of online data and more specifically reader responses will be explained next. Sensible guidelines that are of use to any researcher in the CMC field are discussed. For example, the fact that reader responses are publicly accessible and users are aware of the consequences of posting their views publicly to a mass media readership are useful considerations to guide a researcher's judgment in the ethical treatment of their data.

After the general introduction of my data, the empirical analysis follows. In total, I investigated the data for five main analytical dimensions. Each of the sections will conclude with a detailed presentation of the results across the five newspapers and a discussion thereof.

Firstly, to set the discursive and pragmatic space of this study, the participation framework and communicative situation of reader responses will be described. The journalists and audience members' communicative roles will be explained and based

on these findings an advanced mass communication model for online reader responses suggested.

Next, taking a top-down view, impoliteness will be first analysed at a global discourse level. Impoliteness does not evolve in isolation, as the analysis of conflictive impolite exchanges among commentators will demonstrate. Here the analysis of longer threads of reader response discussions helps to identify types of defensive and offensive reactions following a first face threatening insult. Also strategies to end an impolite conflictive encounter will be discussed.

The third analytical dimension will show that despite reader-responses' interactive dialogic setup, they can be situated along a reactive-interactive continuum of interaction based on the length (number of turns) of the individual conflictive impolite exchanges between participants.

The fourth analytical dimension forms the analytical backbone for all four other investigations and offers a framework to conceptualize impoliteness in online reader responses. Therefore, the concept of personal attacks is suggested and used to capture face threatening offences in this context. In argumentation theory this form of attack is also known as *argumentum ad hominem*. Taking this concept as a starting point I am going to introduce and illustrate the twelve different types of personal attacks which were identified in my data by means of a combined top-down and bottom-up method. Special attention will be paid to *Express Online* in the second part of this section. The newspaper stands out for its relatively small but very active group of contributors to reader response debates. They are also responsible for a high use of personal attacks in their postings compared to users on other news media sites. I will investigate the reasons for this phenomenon. A closer look at the various user profiles and relationships among individual participants will show that especially one user appears to be in conflict with a number of co-contributors. This leads to the question whether his/her behaviour can be compared to that of a flamer.

The empirical investigation concludes with a study of name-calling and swearing. Both features have frequently been considered in impoliteness studies. While it is proposed that these features should not be treated a priori as impolite, it is explored how their occurrence in personal attacks can potentially reinforce evaluations of impoliteness in the context of reader responses.

In the last chapter, I will revisit my research questions and give a summary of the key arguments and main results of this study. In a final step, I will establish the

relevance of my research for the field of impoliteness studies and provide input for areas of future research.

## 2. THEORETICAL SCOPE: (ONLINE) MASS MEDIA COMMUNICATION

### 2.1. Defining “medium” and “media”: Multi-layered concepts

When talking about “the media” one conventionally thinks of the concept as a cover term to refer to broadcast, radio and press agencies. However, the word “medium” has multiple meanings and definitions often depend on the conceptual approach that is taken. Dürscheid (2005) summarizes the most important media concepts based on Posner (1986:293–297) (see Table 1). While the concept can thus refer to the producers and distributors of news (sociological), it can also refer to the technological means to communicate (e.g. through the telephone, TV or computer) and may also include language as a medium itself (code-related) (Dürscheid 2007; Lewis 2005:95).

**Table 1.** Central media concepts

Media concept	Example
Biological	Audio-visual media
Physical	Optical/acoustical media
Technological	Print media
Sociological	Publisher/Broadcasting service
Culture-related	Fiction/Non-fiction
Code-related	Language

Taking a broad perspective, the word may also refer to so-called biological media – that is the human organs necessary for sending, receiving and producing signs (Dürscheid 2005). Dürscheid (2005), who adheres to a technological medium/media concept, further suggests that we need to distinguish between the medium as technical means to transmit linguistic and non-linguistic signs (radio station, computer etc.) and the different forms of communication which use a medium to produce, send and receive information (e.g. radio show, chat, e-mail, blogs). Dürscheid (2005) adds that not all forms of communication need a medium to transmit information (e.g. face-to-face communications). Following Dürscheid’s line of argument, we can thus define reader responses as a form of online communication that uses the technical means of a (mobile) medium such as the computer or smart phones to access online news media (here understood as sociological concept). In turn, the technical setup of the site allows users to produce, send and receive reader responses.

## 2.2. Defining “old” and “new” media

With the advent of the Internet, new communication channels came into being and the expression “new media” turned into a catch phrase to contrast with so-called “old media” or “traditional media”. While “new media” is now an established and much-used term, Luginbühl (2005:425) draws our attention to the fact that the label “new” is problematic since it is a relative concept. According to the author, every period saw the introduction of “new media”. Luginbühl gives the example of the video recorder in the 1980s. Back then this technical device was also considered a “new” medium.

Despite its inherent semantic fuzziness, “new media” has also come to be used to address a number of different aspects. The *Handbook of New Media* (Lievrouw & Livingstone 2006) gives the following broad definition:

[B]y new media we mean information and communication technologies and their associated social contexts, incorporating:

- the artefacts or devices that enable and extend our abilities to communicate;
- the communication activities or practices we engage in to develop and use these devices; and
- the social arrangements or organizations that form around the devices and practices.

Such a complex concept of “new media” thus not only incorporates technical means but also accounts for social aspects as well such as the communicative acts within the social settings. Lister et al. (2008:9, 11) argue against the use of the umbrella term “new media” because of its implication that one is dealing with a homogeneous concept: “So while a person using ‘new media’ may have one kind of thing in mind (the Internet), others may mean something else (digital TV, new ways of imaging the body, a virtual environment or a game).” Lister et al. (2008:9; 11) also critically ask the question: “What is new about ‘new media’?” and suggest that “old” and “new” media should be investigated from a continuum rather than a dyadic perspective. They give the example of the digital TV as opposed to analogue TV. From a technical means perspective, they note, this invention is not really a new medium but rather a new type of content delivered via the same “old” means. The above discussion highlights that we need to have a complex concept of media if we want to capture traditional and innovative aspects successfully for a given time period. Such an approach includes technical means, as well as the distribution, production and reception of content.



### 2.3. Defining “old” and “new” forms of mass media communication

Also the notion of “mass media communication” has been conceptualized in a number of ways. Recently, its usefulness as a concept has also been challenged following rapid Web 2.0 developments and resulting changes in the communicative situation and the role of participants in the online mass media cycle. Traditional accounts of mass media communication (e.g. Lasswell 1948; Maletzke 1998) describe the distribution of information among an unknown and undefined large group of recipients (i.e. the mass audience). Characteristically, traditional conceptualisations also view large organizations such as the press agencies and TV stations as the key manufacturer and disseminator of news content. Another conventional assumption is that audience members often receive messages in a simultaneous manner and the information is sent publicly (Wright 1960:606). Janoschka’s (2004:94) comprehensive overview of the key characteristics commonly attributed to mass media communication (see Table 2) also emphasizes the elements of asynchrony, spatial distance, uni-directionality and passive reception.

**Table 2.** Key elements in traditional mass media communication (Janoschka 2004:94)

Forms/characteristics	Mass communication
Number of addressees	mass
Sequence of transfer	asynchronous, time-shifted
Message transfer	indirect
Spatial contact of comm. partners	absent
Relation S to A	one-to-many
Communicative feedback	generally no, but with restricted possibilities
Message perception	passive
Flow of communication	uni-directional
Information access	public
Basic means of communication	written, spoken language, sound, (animated) graphics and pictures

According to Janoschka (2004), asynchrony in traditional mass media conceptualisations refers to the fact that message production and message perception are not taking place simultaneously. The temporal separation then is also linked to the fact that the communication partners are separated spatially. Equally, since traditional conceptualisations of mass media communication view the flow of communication as uni-directional they also suppose that receivers (i.e. the mass audience) of such content are passive participants (i.e. consumers) since they do not have the possibility to react to the messages directly. In other words, despite limited feedback options via other channels (e.g. telephone, traditional letters to the editor), the interactive and

reciprocal communication between senders and receivers is not accounted for in traditional conceptualisations of mass media communication.

In the light of Web 2.0 developments – especially with the introduction of interactive online communication forms such as blogs, discussion fora, Facebook and Twitter – key defining features of mass media communication were put into question, and it was argued that the concept no longer sufficiently described the dynamics of the online mass media landscape. As Habscheid (2005:47) puts it, not only was there the question whether the Internet<sup>12</sup> as such should be classified as a type of mass communication, but the developments on the Internet triggered discussions about the very theoretical groundwork that models of mass media communication were built on. Suddenly, passive consumers are not only given tools to actively participate and speak to the masses themselves, but they are also given the opportunity to break through the uni-directional communication process and talk back to the institutions that were once considered the sole initiator of mass communication. In the online environment, the features of mass communication and interpersonal communication start to blur (Jucker 2005; Lewis 2005:102). The communicative situation and the role of participants have changed on all levels including production and distribution of information and reception.

In his overview on the historical development of the concept of mass communication, Napoli (2010:505) criticises that despite efforts to reassess the concept of mass media communication, also more recent re-conceptualisations have failed to successfully incorporate the latest developments in the online media landscape. Strikingly, pre-second-world-war mass media definitions were much more dynamic than many present day definitions of mass media communication (especially in terms of interaction and personalization) according to the author (Napoli 2010:508). Napoli (2010:508) refers to Peters (1996:109), who describes how mass media communication was understood preceding and throughout the World War II period:

[T]hinkers who pondered broadcasting were attentive to the potential for interchange within large scale communication... Many were fascinated and alarmed by radio's apparent intimacy, its penetration of private spaces, and its ability to stage dialogues and personal relationships

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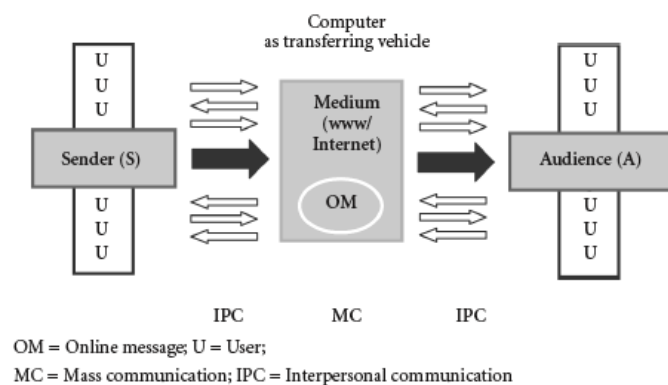
<sup>12</sup> One should add that most academic research has moved on and no longer talks about the Internet as a homogenous unit, which can be described as one consistent whole.

with listeners. The question was often less how radio amassed audiences than how it individualized them.

Napoli (2010:505) reasons that the concept is flexible enough to reflect the present interactive nature of mass media communication as long as the audience is given a much more central role. He argues that the audience as producer and receiver of content are crucial in redefining mass media communication successfully, and most importantly there needs to be a redefinition of the sender of information given the fact that “masses can now communicate to the masses” (Napoli 2010:505). A re-conceptualisation of mass media thus requires to incorporate the idea that we are no longer just dealing with “masses” of receivers but that there are now also many more producers that can distribute their messages simultaneously and on a large-scale basis in a number of ways to the masses. In other words, while the mass of receivers was a given factor from an early stage, the producers of content used to be fewer. With the tools available nowadays, especially for the distribution of content, Napoli (2010:505; 509) says that we have to think of producers of content as a mass phenomenon. Consequently, also the “de-institutionalization” of mass communication is key, according to the author. He further points out that as a result institutionalized operators will no longer fulfil the role of the sole producer of mass media content but act more as an aggregator of content.

Despite Napoli’s general criticism of current mass media conceptualisations, Janoschka’s (2004) model of interactive mass communication for online advertising encapsulates the changing nature of mass media communication very well (see Figure 1). First of all, Janoschka (2004) successfully captures the more active role of the audience in the present media landscape by establishing them as “users” symbolized by the abbreviation “U” in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Model of interactive mass communication online (Janoschka 2004:98)



Thereby she differentiates them terminologically from the traditionally passive audience members. This is already a significant step forward in contrast to previous models of mass media communication.

The only criticism that could be mentioned here is well-formulated by Bublitz (2012:170, emphasis in original), who points out that this term also does not completely capture the new role of the audience in the news media cycle:

**User** is a new coinage in (talk about) CMC necessitated by the changed concept of participation. At the same time it is a bit of a misnomer, because CMC-*users* not only *use* what someone else *made* and provided, but *make* and *do* things of their own accord and by themselves.

A solution to this dilemma is proposed by Schmid (2007:110, emphasis in original), who talks about the “prosumer” (cf. also Napoli 2010:509) to describe the shift from the passive news consumer who not only participates as consumer but also acts as producer nowadays:

[D]enn hatten Journalisten und Redaktionen auch schon vor dem Internet-Zeitalter die Orator-Rolle inne, ist diese Rolle für die Nutzer neu – vom ehemals passiven Leser werden sie nun zum *prosumer*, der nicht nur konsumiert, sondern selbst auch produktiv wird.

Also Bruns (2008) emphasizes the new, combined role of user and producer under the heading of “produsage” and “produser”. Napoli (2010:509, emphasis in original) goes a step further and argues that it is not even the role as producer that is central to the new position of audience members in mass media communication but the fact that the distribution of content by audience members has reached unparalleled levels. While many current discussions highlight the fact that a new era of user-generated content exemplifies the more active role of the audience, he thinks the real innovativeness about the role of audience members can be found in their newly available means to distribute content on a large scale basis:

Users’ capacity to generate content has been around for some time, due to the long-established availability of technologies such as home video cameras, PCs, typewriters and home recording equipment. What is different today is the ability of users to *distribute* content, to use the web to circulate their user-generated content (as well as, to media companies’ dismay, traditional media content) to an unprecedented extent.

To illustrate Napoli’s line of thinking, for example, on the *New York Times* users have nine different channels to share news content with other users (Kang 2009:138; quoted in Schmidt 2009:142): LinkedIn, Delicious, Digg, Facebook, Newsvine, Mixx, Yahoo!Buzz, permalink and traditional e-mail.

What's truly innovative about Janoschka's model is the fact that her model is based on features that were traditionally used to differentiate mass media communication from interpersonal communication (see Table 3). Fundamental to this model is the argument that characteristics of personal and mass media communication blur, merge and co-exist in the online space. One aspect that used to clearly differentiate mass media communication from interpersonal communication was the fact that the former was considered public while the later was considered a private form of communication (cf. also Jucker 2005:1). In other words, public communication was associated with mass audiences based on the one-to-many principle and private communication was associated with individuals based on the one-to-one principle. In the light of Web 2.0 (some already talk of Web 3.0 or Web 4.0<sup>13</sup>) developments, however, such a distinction can no longer be sustained (cf. also Schmid 2007:36–37).

**Table 3.** “Interactive mass communication” (Janoschka 2004:100)

Characteristics	Interactive mass communication (IMC)	
	IPC*	MC**
Number of addressees	individuals	mass
Number of senders	INDIVIDUAL/MASS	
Sequence of transfer	synchronous	asynchronous
Message transfer		indirect
Spatial contact of comm. partners		absent
Relation S to A	one-to-one	one-to-many
Feedback	(immediately) reciprocal	
Message perception	active	
Flow of communication	multi-directional exchange	
Access	private	public
Basic means of communication	spoken	written language, sound, (animated) images
	MULTIMEDIA ELEMENTS	
	*IPC= Interpersonal communication ** MC= Mass communication	

Janoschka's model illustrates that public and private conversations merge and co-exist online (cf. also Dürscheid 2007; Jucker 2005:1). To account for these new forms of communication online, Dürscheid (2007) goes even a step further and underlines the need for an alternative and more fine-grained categorization scheme to differentiate public and private communications (cf. also Landert & Jucker 2011). She draws a line between the content of a communicative act and the accessibility of a

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Cf. <http://www.zdnet.com/blog/btl/from-semantic-web-30-to-the-webos-40/4499> (accessed Dec. 27, 2010); cf. [http://www.pcworld.com/article/143110/web\\_40\\_era\\_is\\_upon\\_us.html](http://www.pcworld.com/article/143110/web_40_era_is_upon_us.html) (accessed Dec. 27, 2010).

communicative act. She distinguishes private from non-private contents and publicly and non-publicly accessible communications. Accordingly, a TV news show broadcasts non-private content, which is publicly accessible by a mass audience. In contrast, a phone-in conversation in a counselling programme on the radio is a private conversation accessed publicly by all listeners of the radio programme. When we expand this categorization scheme to the online space, according to Dürscheid (2007), we can, for example, distinguish between private and non-private chat conversations depending on the topic discussed. Also these conversations can be public or non-public depending on whether the chat room is open to the public or access is restricted to a registered number of participants. Based on Dürscheid's categorization, I classify reader responses as accessible to a mass audience and therefore public forms of conversation. They can contain non-private communications as well as private communications (e.g. a debate among commentators over political and environmental issues versus commentators who share their personal experiences during a discussion).<sup>14</sup> It should be added that there appears to be a shift towards more private content in these reader response sections. Landert & Jucker (2011) note such a change in their comparative study of traditional letters to the editor, published by *The Times* in 1985 and online reader responses posted on *Times Online* in 2008.

Janoschka's model for interactive mass communication also accounts for the fact that the relation between the speaker (S) and addressee (A) has changed. Online discussion fora, blogs or social networking sites demonstrate that mass media communication is no longer a one-to-many type of interaction. Thanks to the possibilities online we now find all kinds of "multiple-directional exchanges" (Janoschka 2004:100–101) or "many-to-many" forms of interactions (Androutsopoulos 2005:118). Janoschka (2004:100) also suggests that this new level of interactive communication online is not simply a product of summing up features of mass and interpersonal communication but that "[o]nline communication [...] allow[s] different forms and levels of communication which are only feasible on the medium Internet." To illustrate this new audience engagement Janoschka (2004:100–101) gives the example of web ads and argues that they

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<sup>14</sup> For a useful distinction between private and public topics in mass media communication see Landert & Jucker (2011). They suggest the following distinction: "Private topics are those that affect single individuals or very small groups of people while public topics are those that lack this concentration on a private individual or a very small group."

do not only combine characteristics of interpersonal and mass communication, but they also realize new forms of advertising communication. An active participation through interpersonal forms of communication exists side-by-side with the retrieval of information that is directed to a mass audience (e.g. online newspapers).

Since new dimensions of interaction and interactivity are a core feature of online mass communication, the following section will deal with interactivity and the various modes of audience involvement that are now integrated features on online news media. I will also ask the question whether these new forms of audience involvement are truly interactive. Finally, I will explore the reasons why online news media are eager to include audience members as active participants in the news cycle.

## **2.4. Audience involvement, interaction and interactivity in the online news media**

“Obviously one has to be very careful when applying the term interactive.” (Schultz 2000:209)

Interactive communication modes have evolved into a distinctive feature of CMC. Examples range from more recent additions like Twitter – a real-time information network – to already well-established types including social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn), picture and video sharing sites (Flickr, YouTube), online role-playing games (World of Warcraft, SecondLife) and CMC pioneers including chat rooms, guestbooks and personal online journals (blogs). All are tailored to interactive communication. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides following two entries for the term “interactive” (OED, entry for *interactive*, adj.):

1. Reciprocally active; acting upon or influencing each other.
2. Pertaining to or being a computer or other electronic device that allows a two-way flow of information between it and a user, responding immediately to the latter’s input.

In these two records the emphasis is put on the fact that two entities engage in a bidirectional and thus inherently dialogic exchange. The two entities can but do not have to be humans (i.e. human-to-device communication). Crucially, both entities have the means and power to “affect” one another in a given interchange. In other words, both are able to send and receive information (cf. Angouri & Tseliga 2010:15; Jucker 2006:113).

Despite the innovative networking-character of interactive communication channels in CMC, such systems have existed in other forms before. Traditional media introduced forms of personal audience contributions to break with the traditional one-

directional form of communication (Burger 2005:71; Jucker 2000:654) associated with mass media communication for decades. Changes started in the traditional media with the introduction of talk-back channels including letters to the editor, phone-in radio and TV programmes or audience contests and games (Habscheid 2005:53–54; Jucker 2005:9).

With these early interaction channels, mass media took a step forward towards a more intense engagement with their audience. In practice, however, in such a setting only a small and selected group of audience members (Jucker 2005:10) are given the chance to actively participate and get their voices heard. In fact, these audience members are staged as representatives of the entire mass audience for the sake of mass media productions (Habscheid 2005:53–54). Nevertheless, phone-ins and letters to the editor give the audience the feeling that they are participating in a symmetric conversation. Next to the fact that the number of active participants in such conversations is very small compared to the entire audience also moderation policies are in place. Listeners and readers are not given unlimited, unedited speaking time or column space to express themselves. Jucker (2005:14) illustrates this control on speaking time with the example of a phone-in programme. If radio-hosts want to have their turn or want to interrupt the phone-in participant, they do not have to wait until the caller stops talking. They have the technological means to mute a caller at their disposal. If well done, the listening audience may not even be aware of this moderation (Jucker 2005:14).

With the advent of CMC channels, news media are given additional opportunities and bandwidth to engage and attract a much larger number of audience members via their online news platforms. The interactive design of online news allows the readership to take on influential discursal roles and much stronger active speaking rights in the news communication cycle. Users can now actively participate in the shaping of current events by complementing the news with diverse viewpoints or reacting to deficiencies in the news report (Schlobinski & Siever 2005:55 on journalistic blogs). Also, while speaking rights were in the hands of the journalists for decades, the “silent” and “moderated/edited” reader of news becomes now a more active participant and even producer of news (Bruns 2005:315).<sup>15</sup> For instance, users

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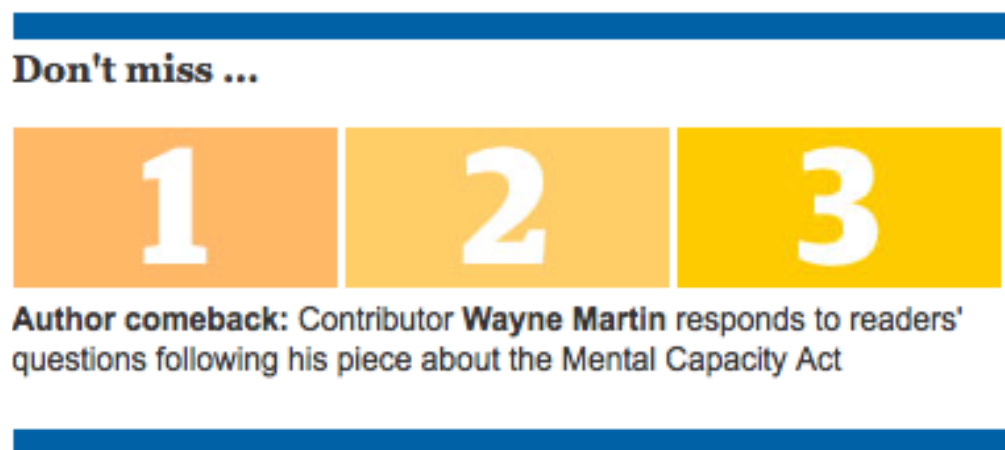
<sup>15</sup> It has to be said though that moderation still plays a role on most news sites. How powerful the speaking rights of readers really have become will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs. Also, we have to differentiate between the speaking rights that a user may receive



can directly and quickly, without change of the medium, contact the journalists and blog contributors and ask questions (see Figure 2). Readers are invited to “have their say” and post their personal views and experiences on news sites, suggest story ideas (see Figure 3 and Figure 4) and send in or even sell their personal story (see Figure 5).

Users are also invited to report “from the field” (see Figure 6 and Figure 7) as illustrated by the two examples from the *Mail Online* and the *Guardian Online*. In the first case, the newspaper invites eyewitnesses of terror raids in London to share their personal experience right from the scene. In the second case, *Guardian Online* asks users to send in their photographic impressions of “pond life”.

**Figure 2.** *Guardian Online*: Newspaper contributor answers readers’ questions<sup>16</sup>



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on the superintended platform of a news media site and independent (i.e. private) news blogs that are beyond the news producers’ editorial control. For a detailed discussion on the role and power of news blogs and the related phenomenon of citizen journalism consult Bruns (2008). Subsequently, I will only be talking about the speaking rights that users may receive on institutional news media sites.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. for more details on Martin Wayne see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/wayne-martin> (accessed Aug. 23, 2010) and for Martin Wayne’s interaction with *Guardian* commentators see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/20/mental-health> (accessed Aug. 23, 2010).

**Figure 3.** *Guardian Online*: Range of community features with audience involvement<sup>17</sup>


You

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- [Write to us](#)
- [Guardian readers' editor](#)
- [Observer readers' editor](#)

## Find us

- [Guardian Facebook app](#)
- [...on Twitter](#)
- [...on Facebook](#)
- [...on YouTube](#)

## Get involved

### Comment on blogs and articles



Got something to say? You can comment on all [blog posts](#) and a growing number of articles on the site. Just look for the comment icon, and join the conversation

### Have your say on the big issues of the day



Read expert opinion, comment and analysis and join the debate in the conversations which follow. [Comment is free](#) recently won an award from the Association of Online Publishers, which noted that the site "brings traditional editorial rigour and values to the future of online citizen journalism"

### Sending us your pictures



Got a picture you want to share? You can send us your pictures and they may appear on guardian.co.uk, in the Guardian or in the Observer

### Share your travel tips and secrets

## Recent travel tips added by the community

**Cape Town**  
**V&A Waterfront**  
 Posted by MaryTebje  
 12 Apr 2012

**Bali**  
**Bawang Merah Beachfront Restaurant Jimbaran Bay**  
 Posted by TomSunday  
 12 Apr 2012

**London**  
**Kew Bridge Steam Museum**  
 Posted by KatieB13  
 12 Apr 2012

[Send us a tip](#)  
[More Been there tips](#)

## What people are clipping

Nothing has been clipped in Community in the last 7 days. See [what else is popular on guardian.co.uk](#).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/community> (accessed Apr. 12, 2011).

**Figure 4.** *Guardian Online*: “Contribute to regular features and columns”<sup>18</sup>

The screenshot shows the Guardian Online website's navigation bar with links for News, Sport, Comment, Culture, Business, Money, and London 2012. Below this is a grey bar with 'Information' and 'Community' tabs. The main heading is 'Contribute to regular features and columns'. A sub-header reads: 'A list of the main sections which involve regular input from readers guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 5 January 2011 14.56 GMT Article history'. The text explains that readers can contribute experiences, opinions, suggestions, questions, and answers on various topics. It states that content created by readers will appear on the 'Guardian readers contributor tag page'. It also mentions opportunities for participation in print and web experiences, organized by theme. A section titled 'Main areas for participation' lists several options: Letters (all letters to the Guardian, Observer, and guardian.co.uk), Notes & queries (questions that are bizarre, perverse, or seemingly trivial but persistent), Other lives (obituaries and lives beyond formal recognition), Media (writing in with news and tips), and Good to meet you (meeting other readers and being interviewed).

the **guardian**

News | Sport | Comment | Culture | Business | Money | London 2012

Information > Community

## Contribute to regular features and columns

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A list of the main sections which involve regular input from readers  
guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 5 January 2011 14.56 GMT  
[Article history](#)

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There are numerous regular features, columns and sections in our publications to which readers can contribute experiences, opinions, suggestions, questions - and answers! - on a range of topics.

Any content that is solely or partly created by you, our readers, will then appear on [our Guardian readers contributor tag page](#).

You'll find opportunities for participation scattered throughout our print and web experiences, but here are short cuts to some of the most popular, organised roughly by theme:

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### Main areas for participation

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- [Letters](#) - all letters to the Guardian, Observer and guardian.co.uk, independent of subject matter. From this page you can narrow letters by topic.
- [Notes & queries](#) - Ask and answer questions that only fools and geniuses would dream of: questions so bizarre, so perverse, so seemingly trivial - and yet so relentlessly persistent - that they refuse to go away.
- [Other lives](#) - Obituaries pages traditionally describe and celebrate the lives of the great and good, the famous and infamous. There is another type of life that deserves noticing: people less in the public eye, or lives lived beyond formal recognition
- Media - [editor@mediaguardian.co.uk](mailto:editor@mediaguardian.co.uk) - write in with news and tips
- Good to meet you - Meet other readers and find out about where they read the Guardian. If you would like to be interviewed in this space, send a brief note to: [good.to.meet.you@guardian.co.uk](mailto:good.to.meet.you@guardian.co.uk).

<sup>18</sup> *Guardian Online* offers such an overwhelming wealth of opportunities for audience members to contribute that they have started providing overviews to make sure users are aware of all the options they have to contribute to the online news sites (cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/users/how-to-contribute>; accessed Jan. 10, 2011).

Figure 5. *Sun Online*: Sell your story<sup>19</sup>

The screenshot shows the homepage of The Sun Online. At the top, there's a red banner with the 'THE Sun' logo and the date 'Wednesday, 11 August 2010'. Below the banner is a navigation bar with links: HOME, MY SUN, SITE MAP, NEWS ALERTS. A sidebar on the left lists various categories: VIDEO, NEWS (with sub-links like SunVote, Forces, Sun City, Captain Crunch), SPORT (with sub-links like Football, F1 & Motorsport, Columnists, Dream Team), SHOWBIZ (with sub-links like Bizarre, Bizarre USA, Film, Music), BIG BROTHER TV (with sub-links like Soaps, Brit's Got Talent, Big Brother, X Factor), and LIVE it WOMAN (with sub-links like Mums & Dads, Beauty, Fashion). The main content area is titled 'Sell your story to The Sun' and includes a 'Published: 25 Jan 2010' date, a comment count 'Add a comment (2)', and contact information for journalists. It also provides details on how to contact them via phone, email, or text, and mentions a 'Green Card' prize.

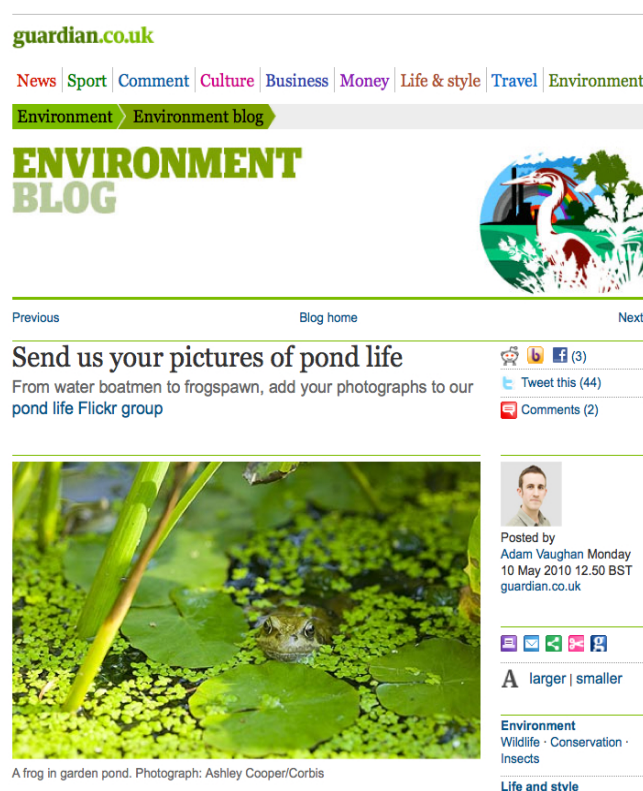
Figure 6. *Mail Online*: Report from the field<sup>20</sup>

The screenshot shows the homepage of Mail Online. At the top, there's a large 'MailOnline' logo. Below it is a navigation bar with links: Home, News, U.S., Sport, TV&Showbiz, Femail, Health, Science, Money, RightMinds. A secondary navigation bar includes links: News Home, Arts, Headlines, Pictures, Most read, News Board. The main content area is titled 'Send us your stories' and includes a 'Comments (0) | Share' link. It features a yellow box with the text 'Answer for a chance to win a Green Card to the USA' and a red box with the text 'Who is the US President?'. The section also includes a call to action for users to share their experiences with the news, specifically mentioning 'London terror arrests' and 'Tavistock Road'. It provides an email address 'editorial@dailymailonline.co.uk' and a phone number '0207 782 4100'. At the bottom, there are links for 'Print this article', 'Read later', and 'Email to a friend'.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. [http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/sell\\_your\\_story/article114782.ece](http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/sell_your_story/article114782.ece) (accessed Aug. 11, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-355045/Send-stories.html> (accessed Aug. 10, 2010).

**Figure 7.** *Guardian Online*: “Send us your pictures”<sup>21</sup>



Although mass media communication has undoubtedly become more interactive and news media likes to distinguish themselves with the user-friendly label “interactive”, researchers like Schultz (2000:206–211) argue that not all interactions between users and the news media provider can be labelled truly interactive and “pseudo participation” of audience members has also become a common feature of online news media. While his framework was created a decade ago, it is still applicable to today’s discussion of interaction in online news media. Schultz (2000:205) advocates a more careful application of this “inflated” term by drawing a more fine-grained line between, what he calls, different degrees of interactivity.<sup>22</sup> Based on different forms of communication through which journalists and readers have the option to communicate, he illustrates one-way (and thus non-interactive communication), reactive and truly interactive exchanges in a news media setting (see Table 4).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. <http://www.Guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2010/may/10/flickr-pond-life-images> (accessed Aug. 10, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Schultz (2000) does not distinguish between interaction as a social concept and interactivity as a technical concept in his research. I will elaborate in more detail on differences between these two terms in subsequent paragraphs. For Schultz interactivity is a social concept.

**Table 4.** Degrees of interactivity in mass media communication (Schultz 2000:211)

	<b>Journalist–Reader</b>	<b>Reader–Reader (Journalism as forum)</b>
<b>One-way communication</b>	Journalistic messages	Published letters/email to the editor Reader sites Citizens quoted/portrayed
<b>Two-way/reactive communication</b>	Letters (mail, email, fax) Polls Question and answer sections Call-ins	Letters and calls referring to other letters or calls  Online forum postings
<b>Interactive communication</b>	Town meetings Online discussion boards/chats with journalists participating In general: communicative threads via (e)mail, phone, face-to-face, video-conferencing	Town meetings Online discussion boards Chat rooms Email threads initiated by forums

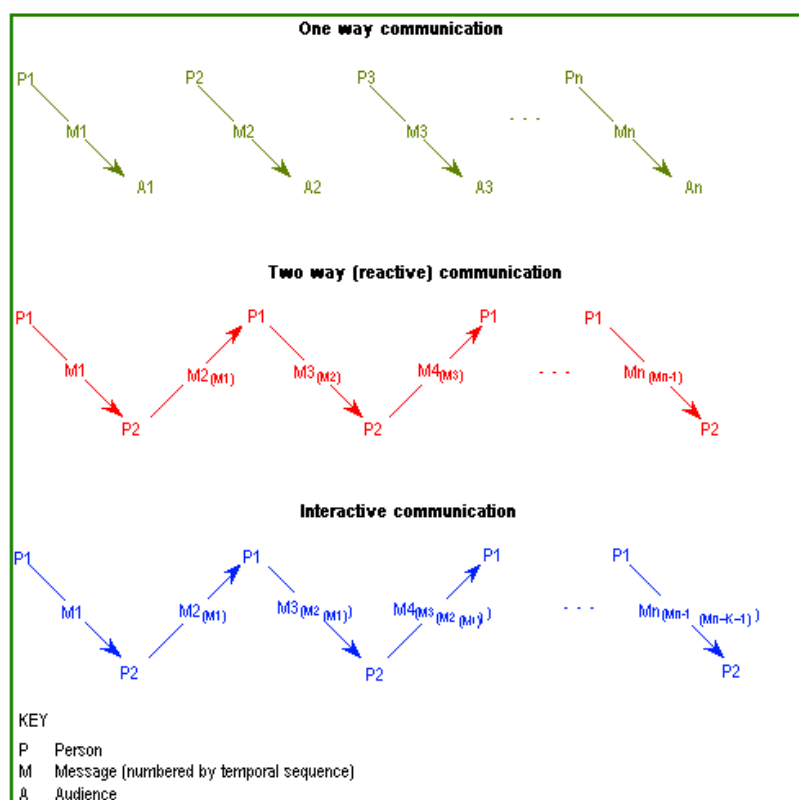
Schultz (2000:210) builds on Rafaeli & Sudweeks’ (Rafaeli 1988; Rafaeli & Sudweeks 1997) division of one-way, reactive and interactive communication settings and summarizes their framework as follows:

In one-way communication, one source sets the agenda, receiving no feedback or very indirect feedback. Eventually, in two-way, or reactive, communication one side responds to the other, but such communication remains reactive unless ‘later messages in any sequence take into account not just messages preceded them, but also the manner in which previous messages were reactive’ [=interactive communication].

In Rafaeli & Sudweeks’ (1997) words then fully interactive communication “forms a social reality”. They also stress the point that interactivity<sup>23</sup> is a matter of degree rather than a “condition” that is either present or absent in a communicative situation. While reactive communication can thus be viewed as a form of two-way communication that requires a message to refer to a previous message, it is not truly interactive in the sense that it misses the ongoing “flow” of multiple message exchanges. Also it is not based on the sum of meaning that was constructed during an interaction. Importantly, in a truly interactive communicative setting discursal roles are symmetrical in the sense that they are “interchangeable” (Schultz 2000:210). Figure 8 shows how Rafaeli & Sudweeks (1997) visualize the internal exchange structure of the three modes of communication.

<sup>23</sup> Like Schultz they also understand interactivity as a social concept, i.e. the communicative interaction between participants.

**Figure 8.** The three types of communication (Rafaeli & Sudweeks 1997)



While Rafaeli & Sudweeks (Rafaeli & Sudweeks 1997) remark that CMC provides a range of means to allow for interactive exchanges, they also think that interactivity is not an inherent quality related to the technical means through which communication takes place. The authors (Rafaeli & Sudweeks 1997) stress that “[i]nteractivity is not a characteristic of the medium” but is “a process-related construct about communication”. This view suggests that one form of communication may allow one-way, reactive and interactive communicative exchanges at the same time.

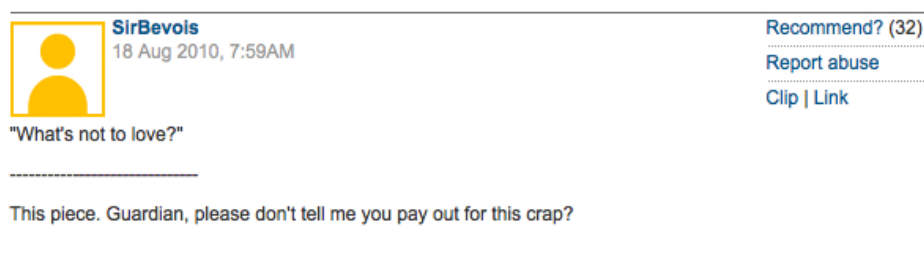
By applying Rafaeli & Sudweek’s interactivity framework to mass media communication and especially to online news media communication, Schultz’s empirical study on *New York Times* journalists and readers suggests that e-mail communication between journalists and readers is predominantly reactive rather than interactive. According to him, when journalists simply answer an e-mail request by a reader or when users just leave a message on an online forum, this should be seen as a reactive rather than an interactive discussion (see Table 4). A truly interactive exchange, according to Schultz, would then be possible on an online forum discussion board among readers. In summary, though news sites have invested a lot of time and money in the last decade(s) to increase the number of opportunities to engage users in



interactive discussions on their sites, the argument still holds true that not all communication on news sites between the journalists and readers is truly interactive. The lack of time in their jobs is one factor that prevents journalist from active discussions with their audience says Schultz (2000:212). Richard Cohen, a journalist at the *Washington Post*, explains it as follows (cited in Cotter 2010:127): “We give you our e-mail addresses and then, in theory, we have this nice chat. Forget about it. Not only is e-mail too often a kind of epistolary spitball, but there’s no way I can even read the 3,506 e-mails now backed up in my queue – seven more since I started writing this column.”

Schultz’s model is also useful to show the dynamics of communication in the type of data analysed in this study here. While we can definitely find interactive debates on reader response sites and the news site encourages these exchanges, we can also find numerous instances of reactive communication in reader response sections. As illustrated in Figure 9 the commentator “SirBevois” reacts to the article titled “Tony Blair's £5m pledge is not enough” by Hadley Freeman, a journalist at *Guardian Online*. It seems that the user is not interested in an interactive debate with the journalist but comments with the aim to vent her/his emotions. The commentator does so by claiming that the article is not what she/he would expect the newspaper to pay for. In fact she/he is not the only commentator who attacks the journalist.

**Figure 9.** *Guardian Online*: Reactive interaction between user and journalist<sup>24</sup>

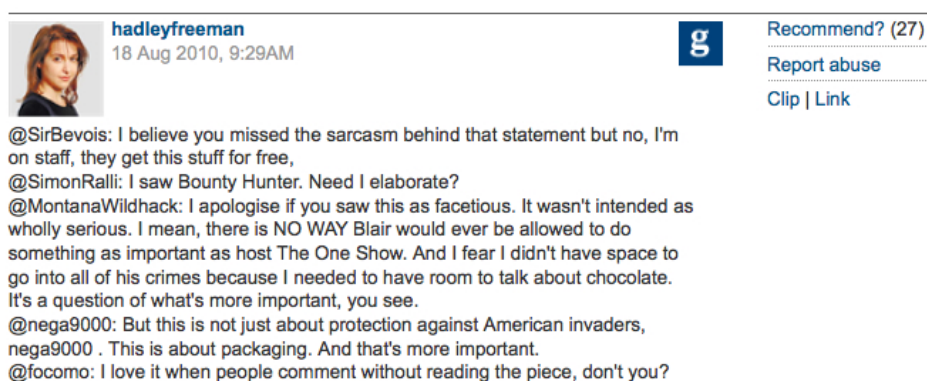


As a consequence, the *Guardian* journalist Hadley Freeman feels the need to react to a number of commentators including a reply to “SirBevois’s” message (see Figure 10). Interestingly, this remains a one-off exchange. Only one out of the five other users, namely “focomo”, provides a second comment in response to the journalist’s remarks. No real ongoing exchange evolves.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/18/tony-blair-pledge-reputation> (accessed Aug. 18, 2010).



**Figure 10.** *Guardian Online*: Reactive interaction between journalist and users<sup>25</sup>



In his research on reader responses, Upadhyay (2010:110) argues along similar lines,

[w]hile reader responses are prompted by ideas and views expressed in the media (or its online version), response writers do not usually engage in a dialogic interaction with the author of the article publicly [...] In addition, the author does not generally post a response back to a reader's comments unlike in a face-to-face or synchronous conversation in which the participants can, and generally do, continue to respond to each other.

One could suspect that reader response sections are not primarily useful for interactive debates since users also have the opportunity to engage in interactive discussions in other community areas of news media sites including online discussion boards (e.g. "Talkboard" on *Guardian Online*, "MyTelegraph" on *Telegraph Online* and *Mail Online* discussion groups).<sup>26</sup> For example, *Mail Online* states in the house rules that there is a limit of 10 comments in 24 hours per individual users to comment on articles. They do not have such a restriction on their message boards.<sup>27</sup> Such a factor could help to explain why interaction may be more limited in reader responses. However, not all newspapers have such a limit on comments in place, and as already mentioned it appears that the technical interactivity offered by other forms of communication does not automatically trigger more interactive exchanges. Marcochia (2004:118; 122), who studied the overall conversation structure and participation framework of a number of French USENET newsgroups (similar to discussion

<sup>25</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/18/tony-blair-pledge-reputation> (accessed Aug. 18, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Chat rooms are arguably the form of communication which by default allow the most interactive discussions due to their synchronous nature. However newspapers do not always offer them. For example, none of the five online media outlets in my data set offer this functionality (status July 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/house\\_rules.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/house_rules.html) (accessed Jan. 14, 2011).

boards), revealed that while the technical infrastructure allows users to make use of a conversation framework, a number of contributions were rather “monological [*sic*] than truly dialogal [*sic*]”. Hoffmann (2010:215) reached a similar conclusion in his study of cohesive ties in weblogs and associated comment sections. Based on his analysis, he concludes that interaction in the comment sections of weblogs is rare, and most frequently comments are “autonomous units of discourse” rather than truly interactive exchanges among contributors.

Building on Schultz’s model, reader responses then could be situated along a continuum of reactive-interactive communication. While some entries may trigger a heated interactive debate among participants, other entries simply are commented on in passing in a consecutive entry or are simply ignored and never taken up again. The possible different levels of interaction thus appear to be to some extent independent of the asynchronous nature of this form of communication. In how far reader responses in my data set can be labelled reactive or rather interactive will be discussed in-depth in the empirical section of this study (sections 4.5 and 4.5.1). There I will look at the sequential discourse dynamics in conflictive exchanges among users and users and journalists (see also section 4.3 for a more detailed discussion on the communicative situation in reader responses).

In summary, it can be concluded that e-mails, forum discussion boards and reader responses, despite their asynchronous and distant nature, are designed for dialogic exchanges (cf. Dürscheid 2005). However, while they allow for interactive communication, this does not necessarily imply that audience members also use them in such a manner. I agree with Hoffmann (2010:225) and Schultz (2000) that the possible levels of interaction are not an inherent quality of a technical means and that one form of communication may allow for reactive and interactive exchanges at the same time. A distinction between reactive and interactive communication is also useful because it suggests that news media are potentially less open to audience engagement than they would like their audience to believe.

As already mentioned in passing, the whole discussion on interactivity is complicated by the term’s multiple meanings and usage often depends on the academic field of study. Schmid (2007:177) notes that the term “interactivity” has also suffered from researchers’ unclear, over-extensive and profligate use of the concept. Basically, we can differentiate between the concept as a social construct (as used in the field of sociology) and as a technical construct (as used in the field of

information technology). Schmid (2007:177) argues that especially in the “new” media this conceptual distinction has become blurred. While sociological and linguistic conceptualisation focus on the reciprocal communicative exchange between participants and the relationships between these participants, information technologists use the term to refer to human-to-device communication (Habscheid 2005:60; Schmid 2007:177–178).

To establish a clear distinction between these two types in CMC, Habscheid (2005:59) and Jucker (2003:139) talk about “interaction” when they refer to the social concept and use the term “interactivity” to refer to technical processes, that is, the human-device communication. Manovich (2001:55–56) even talks about “the myth of interactivity” in relation to “new” media. From a technical point of view, according to him, all interaction with a computer is interactive by default. Therefore, in his view, such an observation is redundant to mention. In contrast to technological interactivity, Manovich (2001:55–56) argues that we need to focus on the “user’s experience of these structures”. The author (2001:55–56) therefore differentiates between the “physical interaction between a user and a media object (pressing a button, choosing a link, moving the body)” and the “psychological interaction” which includes such actions like “filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall and identification”.

Eisenlauer & Hoffmann (2010:103) argue along the line of Manovich but still prefer to talk about different stages of interactivity. They do not differentiate between the technical and the social concept in their three-step model designed for weblog communications but rather distinguish between a cognitive, selective and participatory level of interactivity. According to Eisenlauer & Hoffmann (2010:103), the least interactive “first degree interactivity” relates to the mental processes in a user who is confronted with some form of “traditional” text. In other words, this level describes the users’ passive absorption of non-changeable texts as we know it from traditional, printed material. Manovich’s concept of “psychological interaction” could be subsumed under this heading. Next is the “second degree interactivity” which describes the domain where a user can actively choose different ways to process text. Manovich’s examples of pressing a button or clicking a link would fall into this category. Last is the “third degree interactivity” which subsumes processes that involve users as active text producers. Eisenlauer & Hoffmann (2010:103) give here the example of a user who submits a response to a blogger’s weblog entry. By engaging the user as a member of the overall text production on a blog site the

maximum level of interactivity is accomplished according to Eisenlauer & Hoffmann (2010:103). Consequently, a reader response submitted by a user on a newspaper site would also fall into this category.

In summary, what Manovich (2001:55–56) likes to label the “physical interaction between a user and a media object” and Eisenlauer & Hoffmann (2010:103) term “second degree interactivity” can be included in human-to-device communication, which describes the ways how users access and consume content. This form of interactivity is also often discussed under the heading of personalisation.<sup>28</sup> Through the non-linearity of the hypertext structure of content sites (Jucker 2003:133–136), users can personalize the ways in which they consume content. For example, users can choose among multiple reading paths on websites (Luginbühl 2005:434). Also, users can regulate when and how much information they want to receive and process: “Alle modernen Medien können (wörtlich oder metaphorisch) ein- und ausgeschalten werden: Man kann jederzeit entscheiden, ob und wann man sich ihnen aussetzen will oder nicht [...]” (Schmitz 2004:60).

Here one could criticise that while these are definitely characteristic features of new media, they are rather an accelerated and more advanced continuation of the basic means which traditional media consumers also already had at hand to regulate the type and amount of content they consumed. For example, back then consumers also had the option to skip pages or simply trash a newspaper, turn off the TV or switch TV channels. On the other hand, truly innovative are features where users can customize (Jucker 2003:137; Luginbühl 2005:439) their news site by selecting news topics they would like to view on their personalised landing page and by deselecting topics they would not like to be informed about. Such options of personalisation are possible for users on *bbc.co.uk* (see Figure 11). Next to content choices (e.g. weather, radio, travel) users there also have to option to adjust the page colour of the website according to personal preferences (see Figure 12 and Figure 13).

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<sup>28</sup> This form of personalisation needs to be differentiated from the linguistic form of personalisation which is characteristic for both online and offline mass media communication (cf. Jucker 2003:136). Jucker (2005:10) suggests that the direct address to the TV viewers, radio listeners or newspaper readers gives them the feeling that the journalist is aware of their presence and seeks to actively involve them in the communication.

Figure 11. *BBC Online*: Customize your website<sup>29</sup>

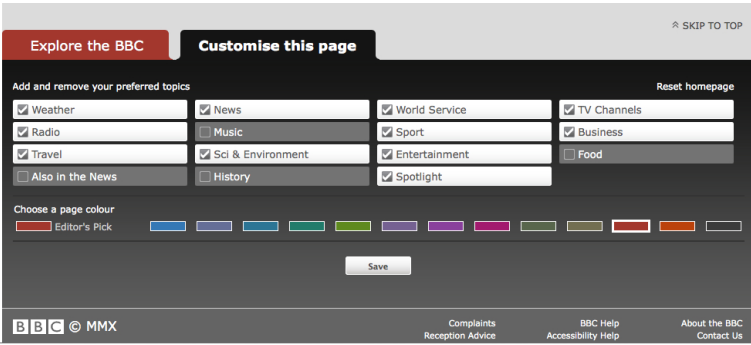


Figure 12. *BBC Online*: Example 1 for a customized landing page<sup>30</sup>

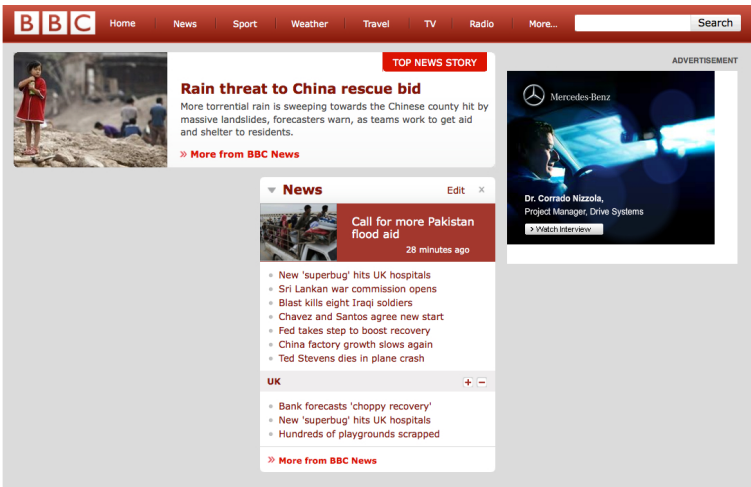
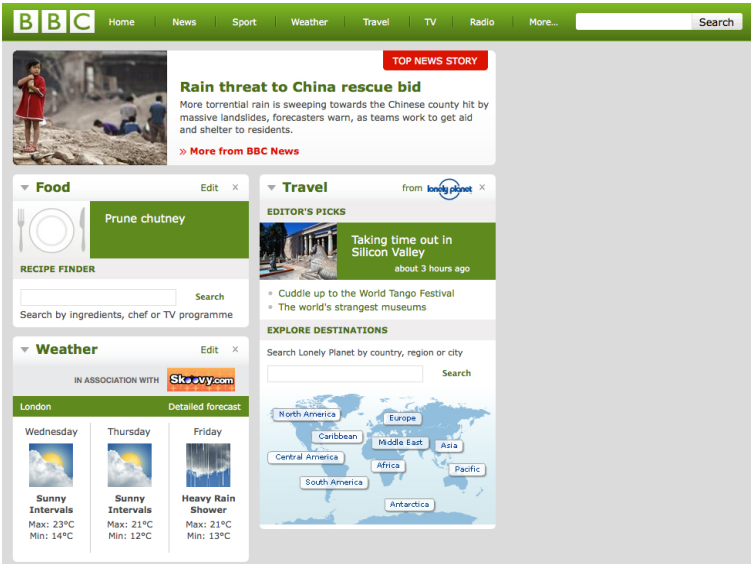


Figure 13. *BBC Online*: Example 2 for a customized landing page<sup>31</sup>



<sup>29</sup> Cf. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/> (accessed Aug. 10, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/> (accessed Aug. 10, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/> (accessed Aug. 10, 2010).

Based on the literature reviewed in the above section, I thus would like to distinguish between the following four aspects of technical interactivity and social interaction inherent to online news media communication:

**1. Human-to-device communication:**

1. TECHNICAL INTERACTIVITY: Users interact with a technical device (i.e. computer, smart phones etc.) to access the Internet and obtain content from news media sites.
2. PERSONALISATION: Users interact with the news media by personalizing the website according to their individual preferences. They access and consume content in a highly customized and selective manner.

**2. Human-to-human interaction:**

1. INTERACTIVE-REACTIVE: Users interact with other readers and/or the journalist via CMC communication channels in a reactive one-off exchange. They are active participants in the production of text on online news media sites.
2. TRULY INTERACTIVE: Users interact with other users and/or the journalist via CMC communication channels in an ongoing dialogic exchange. Like with interactive-reactive communication, they are active participants in the production of text on online news media sites.

These four levels of interactivity and interaction should not be seen in isolation but as different dimensions of a user's experience in the digital world of online news media communication.

**2.4.1. Audience involvement, speaking rights and institutional control**

Despite numerous opportunities for audience participation on today's news platforms we must not forget that these interactions between readers and journalists still take place in a regulated environment. News agencies have always been known for their institutional power to control the nature and type of conversations taking place and the level of interaction they engage in with their audience (cf. O'Keeffe 2006:4 on institutional power, institutional roles, and institutional turn-taking rights). As already mentioned, audience participation on online news sites was introduced to eliminate the traditional one-way communication, which has existed in mass media

communication for decades. The new forms of interactive communication were meant to engage audience members even more actively in the news cycle and resulted in more speaking rights for the previously “silent” or “edited”<sup>32</sup> news consumer. However, moderation policies have not completely disappeared with the advent of online news media and often also apply to reader response sections. All five news media sites in this study have such moderation policies in place. While newspapers surely have less control over the content that is posted on their site than in print editions in earlier days (the sheer amount of comments and discussion threads on forums continuously being added is maybe one of the main reasons), moderation policies still apply. Thus audience members are free to post their views on an article but they have to adhere to the newspaper’s community standards.<sup>33</sup> Otherwise, commentators run the risk of having their comment removed or not published in the first place (see pre- and post-publication moderation). Other restrictions on speaking rights applied by online news producers are related to the choice of topics which are open for discussion.<sup>34</sup> Generally, it is still in the power of the editorial news team to decide which articles are available for reader responses and which are not. In fact, this applies to some degree to all five online news media sources in this study. Three out of the five online news media in this study, namely, the *Guardian Online*, *Sun Online* and *Telegraph Online* regularly publish a number of articles that are not open for the audience to comment. *Express Online* and *Mail Online* appear to do this more infrequently though. The *Express Online* highlights this circumstance with a banner at the end of the respective article: “‘Have your say’ is unavailable for this story.”<sup>35</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> This refers back to the discussion on the earliest forms of audience participation, which were introduced in the news media. Phone-ins and letters to the editor were two ways to give the audience a more active role. In practice, however, audience members were not giving unlimited and unedited speaking time.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. for example *Guardian Online*’s house rules at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/community-standards> (accessed Jan. 14, 2011) or *Mail Online*’s house rules at [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/house\\_rules.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/house_rules.html) (accessed Jan. 14, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Here I refer specifically to reader response sections online. Online discussion boards are more flexible and allow users to self-initiate topics of discussion (e.g. Talkboards on *Guardian Online*). However, also there users need to adhere to newspaper community standards. Excluded here are also articles that were published based on readers’ suggestions. But again, it is the choice of online editors to pick stories they see fit for their online platform.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. for example <http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/222958/Claim-up-to-150-in-free-cash-at-the-Express-Casino-> (accessed Jan. 14, 2011).

news media also decide at times to “shut down” an article for further debates.<sup>36</sup> The *Guardian Online* then notes this with the following line: “Comments on this page are now closed”. O’Keeffe’s (2006:4) description of the asymmetrical power relations between the news agencies as key power holders and their audiences can thus also apply to online news media platforms: “[T]he power holder [is able] to decide when to raise a topic, when to change it and when and how, if at all, to close the conversation (media conversations can just be terminated rather than closed).”

Another aspect that we should not forget is related to size of such an online community. The sheer number of participants engaging in this public discourse can have a muting effect. As Schultz (2000:207) quite rightly argues, “the greater the number of communicators, the less time everyone has to listen to others; the smaller the size of interacting groups, the smaller their significance for society as a whole.” This may apply to reader-reader interactions or journalist-reader interactions alike.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, despite the fact that Internet technology has unlocked additional ways for a more active participation of users in the news media communication cycle, the newly won “voice” of the audience should not be overestimated, especially not on institutionalized platforms. While many have envisioned a democratizing effect through online channels, this does not always reflect reality. Herring et al. (2004) conclude that “[t]he history of online discussion forums thus shows that a ‘democratizing’ technology does not automatically result in social equality, and points to the importance of social and cultural factors surrounding technology adoption and use.” A common socio-cultural argument in this context is that the moderation management of many newspapers, meant to keep interaction civilized, obviously is counterproductive when it comes to giving users the “freedom of speech”. While

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<sup>36</sup> One could argue that the closure of debates is not meant to silence the audience but may be connected to the archive capacities of news sites. *Guardian Online*, however, also argues that they close down threads if conversations are no longer “fresh” or when discussion threads “strays too wildly off topic”. Indirectly, this is also connected to human resource capacities. Since *Guardian Online* moderates all user-generated content on their platform and they want to get involved in conversations on the site, they need to limit the number of interactions to a manageable size to monitor (cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/help/2008/jun/02/1>, accessed Jan. 21, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> The number of participants may of course widely differ across different news sites. For example, in my data set the number of registered unique users is much smaller on *Express Online* compared to *Guardian Online*. In other words, due to the smaller number of participants on *Express Online*, they may have more chance to have their voices heard than they would on *Guardian Online*.



Döring (2003:256) envisions neither total democracy nor total anarchy as feasible outcomes in CMC environments, institutional news media channels remain powerful entities through their site ownership and moderation powers in deciding on the type and amount of interaction they want to engage in.

#### 2.4.2. *The news media's reasons for audience involvement*

Jucker (2000:642) suggests a number of economic and psychological factors that could explain the eagerness of print newspapers to invite readers to share their views. We can apply these motivators also to an online media environment. Just like their print associates, digital newspapers hope to attract and retain a larger readership with interesting and entertaining letters to the editor or online reader responses. Schmidt (2009:140) argues that news media's decision to integrate social-web applications in their portfolio is often driven by the assumption that such an approach intensifies the relationship between the audience and the news provider. They want the users to choose them as their preferred news media provider, build a "Community" feeling (cf. also Döring 2003:522) and ensure quality control of the journalistic work: "Kommentare, Anregungen, Kritik werden auf diese Weise umfassender und schneller sichtbar, was den Druck erhöhen kann, Fehler zu korrigieren oder zu bestimmten Kommentaren Stellung zu beziehen."<sup>38</sup>

Next to giving users the feeling that they are taken more seriously as active participants in the news media cycle, news media can reflect and present a more colourful range of opinions without having to forsake their "objectivity".<sup>39</sup> For example, *Mail Online* explicitly states in the reader response section that "[t]he views expressed in the contents [...] are those of our users and do not necessarily reflect the views of Mail Online."

Also reader responses or forum board discussions may potentially be used as an efficient and unobtrusive tool to gain demographic data and personal interest patterns

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<sup>38</sup> Schmidt adds, however, that such a dialogue is only useful if journalists are open to such criticism. If not, users may be disappointed. In fact, not all online news providers are willing to spend human resource capacities to engage in such interactions with audience members, or spend energy in moderation and community building: "Die Entscheidung, Foren für den Dialog mit dem eigenen Publikum anzubieten, wird zudem noch durch weitere Abwägungen beeinflusst, so ist die Moderation von Kommentaren und das 'Community Management' im Allgemeinen vergleichsweise zeit- und personalintensiv" (Schmidt 2009:140).

<sup>39</sup> Despite newspapers' claims for objectivity, also news media are subject to power dynamics and ideological bias (Dijk 1995; 2008).

(e.g. through personalisation of content on the news site). Additionally, as Warner (2008) and Stadler (2008) speculate, user comments provide a tool to measure public opinion on current issues.<sup>40</sup> Napoli (2010:512) adds that reader comments are also attractive because they offer a vast and inexpensive source of information for journalists to integrate in their own content offerings. Finally, Napoli highlights that many newspaper agencies have discovered that the time spent by users during the activity of communicating can also be commercialized. As the author explains, in the new mass media landscape large institutions have switched their role from content producer to content aggregator and thus offer their platforms for users to produce and distribute their content. In turn, news agencies can use the platforms as a revenue generator in the form of consumer advertising. While giving users a platform to post their comments and share their views on discussion boards, advertisers use the digital space to capture consumers' attention with ads (cf. also Janoschka 2004 for a comprehensive study on web advertising).

## **2.5. Types of written communication modes with talk-back function in the online news media**

As mentioned above, online newspapers provide an increasing number of opportunities for readers to share their personal opinions and invite users to critically discuss and debate news affairs on their interactive community platforms. In the following section I will elaborate on the core characteristics of reader responses and a range of other communication modes with a talk-back function commonly integrated into the offerings on online news media sites. Those means of interaction are: digital letters to the editor, forum discussion boards, integrated (3<sup>rd</sup> party) news blogs and online opinion polls. Recently, online news organisations have also started to connect with their reader community via Twitter and Facebook. These two external 3<sup>rd</sup> party channels, not integral part of the news media platforms themselves, will not be considered in this overview. The discussion of the talk-back modes is inspired by Herring (2007) and Dürscheid's (2005) suggestions for the description of computer-mediated forms of communication. An account of the functionalities and situational

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<sup>40</sup> Obviously, one needs to be careful about the value of such opinion measurements since only very limited data about the background of each individual in reader response sections is known. On some news sites it may also be that a small number of participants operate with different user accounts to have their voices heard and thus falsify the results of such a study.

parameters is not only important to understand the difference between reader responses and other forms of communication but also useful from a linguistic viewpoint because language use and the possible levels of interaction varies in these different channels.

### 2.5.1. *Online reader responses*

Internet-based reader responses (or user comments) are a form of reactive/interactive audience participation and, often, viewed as the successor of traditional letters to the editor (Baron 2008:100). They are written contributions by members of the newspaper audience and allow (pseudo)anonymous users to publicly share their personal opinion and discuss and debate newspaper content with a potentially vast readership (cf. also Dürscheid 2007:5). Usually, newspapers provide an online form at the bottom of articles where users have the option to submit their comments on the spot (i.e. thus without change of medium) (see Figure 14 and Figure 15). If not otherwise stated, comments will appear chronologically on the website instantly after submission. Though asynchronous by definition, they allow for dialogic exchanges between participants (see Figure 16).

**Figure 14.** *Mail Online*: Reader response form online

**Add your comment**

**Name:**

**Town & Country:**

Your name and location will appear next to your comment.

You have 1000 characters left.

We welcome your opinions. This is a public forum. Libellous and abusive comments are not allowed. Please read our [House Rules](#).

☐ I agree to the House Rules


☐ Remember me - this will save you having to type out your name and location when you next leave a comment.

For information about privacy and cookies please read our [Privacy Policy](#).

[Terms](#)

**Figure 15.** *Guardian Online*: Reader response form online

**Figure 16.** *Express Online*: Dialogic interaction between users<sup>41</sup>



**“ NOT BAD ALF\_GARNETT, NOT BAD AT ALL! ”**

02.09.09, 1:59pm

PORRIDGE: - GODBER TO FLETCHER

02.09.09, 1:56pm

'Fletch, what's a practising prison officer?'

Fletcher, 'One that hasn't got a degree yet'.


• Posted by: Alf\_Garnett • Report Comment

Not bad at all Alf,....Not bad at all!

GERONMO

• Posted by: cassandra • Report Comment

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**“ PORRIDGE: - GODBER TO FLETCHER ”**

02.09.09, 1:56pm

'Fletch, what's a practising prison officer?'



Fletcher, 'One that hasn't got a degree yet'.

• Posted by: Alf\_Garnett • Report Comment



Such interactions can vary from one-off reactions to intense ongoing discussions. Time-delays between responses can be very brief (see Figure 17, here user “Revys” response appears just one minute after user “DaveCanuk” posted his views). Comments by different users can also appear simultaneously on the site (see Figure 18).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. <http://www.express.co.uk/comments/viewall/124555/4> (accessed Jan. 11, 2011).

**Figure 17.** *Guardian Online:* Time lag between reader responses<sup>42</sup>

 <p><b>DaveCanuk</b> 14 January 2011 3:06PM</p> <p>Lord, why can't we have a revolution?</p>	<p><a href="#">Recommend?</a> (26)  <a href="#">Report abuse</a>  <a href="#">Clip</a>   <a href="#">Link</a></p>
 <p><b>smuk</b> 14 January 2011 3:06PM</p> <p>The comparison with Rooney are in fact apt – a lot of people do go to see him, live or on TV, and thats why his salary is so high.</p> <p>You want to see banking bonuses come down? Try and live without using banking services. No bank account, credit card, mortgages. Even thats not enough - most of the goods you use, or the corporate making them, rely on commodities and FX traders to transact or hedge.</p> <p>Of course, its a fact that bankers use that criticality to overpay themselves, just like even average footballers get paid a lot. But that was true before the crisis as much as it is today</p> <p>And stop blaming the banking crisis on the banks. Because the reason banks lost money was because ordinary people and developers took out loans they couldn't repay. Most of the trading losses, made by betting on CDOs and derivatives, actually happened at non-banking institutions such as AIG or IKB.</p> <p>And bottomline is – everyone in the west is overpaid. At least the bankers in London are the elite of their profession, while the average plumber, tube operator or airline crew in UK gets paid 30 times as much as someone in India or China for louse, unreliable, third-world service standards.</p>	<p><a href="#">Recommend?</a> (13)  <a href="#">Report abuse</a>  <a href="#">Clip</a>   <a href="#">Link</a></p>
 <p><b>Revy</b> 14 January 2011 3:07PM</p> <p>@ davecanuk im with you!!</p>	<p><a href="#">Recommend?</a> (7)  <a href="#">Report abuse</a>  <a href="#">Clip</a>   <a href="#">Link</a></p>

**Figure 18.** *Guardian Online:* Simultaneous publication of reader responses<sup>43</sup>

 <p><b>Boweevil</b> 14 January 2011 2:25PM</p> <p>Post a comment, what can be said that hasn't been repeated or is known of public opinion generally about payouts?</p>	<p><a href="#">Recommend</a> (43)  <a href="#">Responses</a> (0)  <a href="#">Report</a>  <a href="#">Clip</a>   <a href="#">Link</a></p>
 <p><b>mcylgra3</b> 14 January 2011 2:25PM</p> <p>And before someone posts that they work very long hours and work hard...</p> <p>Sitting infront of 8 computer screens while all you minions do the calculations and run around making your job as easy as possible, while you gamble with your city mates IS NOT HARD WORK!!!</p>	<p><a href="#">Recommend</a> (366)  <a href="#">Responses</a> (0)  <a href="#">Report</a>  <a href="#">Clip</a>   <a href="#">Link</a></p>

Since users cannot be completely sure when exactly comments appear online, they apply two main strategies whenever they want to make a direct reference to a previous commentator. The quoting technique is often used to make clear who one intends to address in a reply (see Figure 16). Here, text chunks of a previous comment that a

<sup>42</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/jan/14/jp-morgan-bankers-share-10bn> (accessed Jan. 14, 2011).

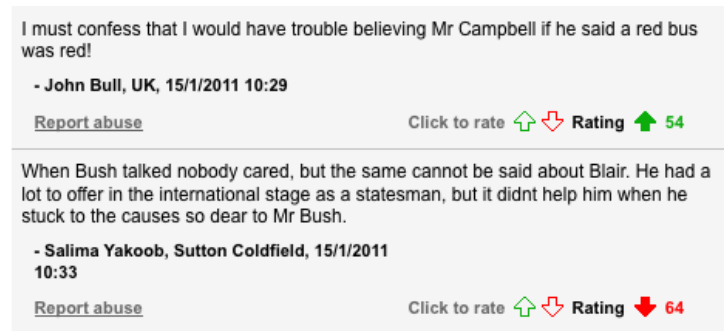
<sup>43</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/jan/14/jp-morgan-bankers-share-10bn> (accessed Jan. 14, 2011).

user would like to react to are copy-pasted into one's own message, marked by quotation marks or some other type of visual formatting to differentiate between one's own words and the word of others. In other cases, the mentioning of nicknames (i.e. pseudonyms) is a common strategy to clarify who a message is intended for. For example, in Figure 17 the commentator "Revy's" use of @ davecanuk right at the start of her/his comment makes it clear that what follows is meant as a reaction to "DaveCanuk's" contribution and "DaveCanuk" is the intended recipient of the message.

Typically there is also a limit in regard to the length of the post (i.e. number of characters per post). For example, *Mail Online* allows 1,000 characters per post whereas *Guardian Online* sets the limit at 5,000 characters (see Figure 14 and Figure 15). There may also be a limit in regard to the number of comments an individual user can post. For example, *Mail Online* has a limit of 10 comments in 24 hours per individual user. Both these restrictions may affect the language use of users. Also, users can hide their true identity by means of pseudonyms; however, whoever wants to use this service needs to register their personal data with the newspaper first. Though user comments ought to reflect the views of the readership, news media sites nevertheless subject reader responses to quality reviews. The moderation process is meant to ensure that users do not post comments that disrespect the community spirit or, more severely, infringe ethical, legal and copyright or privacy laws. Depending on the in-house policies of the respective newspapers (netiquette rules), reader responses will be reviewed prior to their publication (pre-publication moderation) or – and that is the usual practice – they will be post-publication moderated. In such a case, a team of moderators will monitor the website and delete any inappropriate comments as they go along or act on the request of users who report inappropriate comments to the team. In fact, due to the sheer amount of comments being posted by the audience, the moderation teams need to rely on the help of their audience to spot inappropriate comments. While many forms of automatic filters for swear words are available, unacceptable content does not stop with the absence of swear words in a contribution and is thus simply not sufficient to detect contributions which breach the community standards. Usually, there will be a link next to each comment saying something like "Report comment" or "Report abuse" (see e.g. Figure 16 and Figure 19). Additionally, users often have the option to vote whether they agree or disagree with

other users. *Mail Online* provides a green and red arrow respectively for this function (see Figure 19).

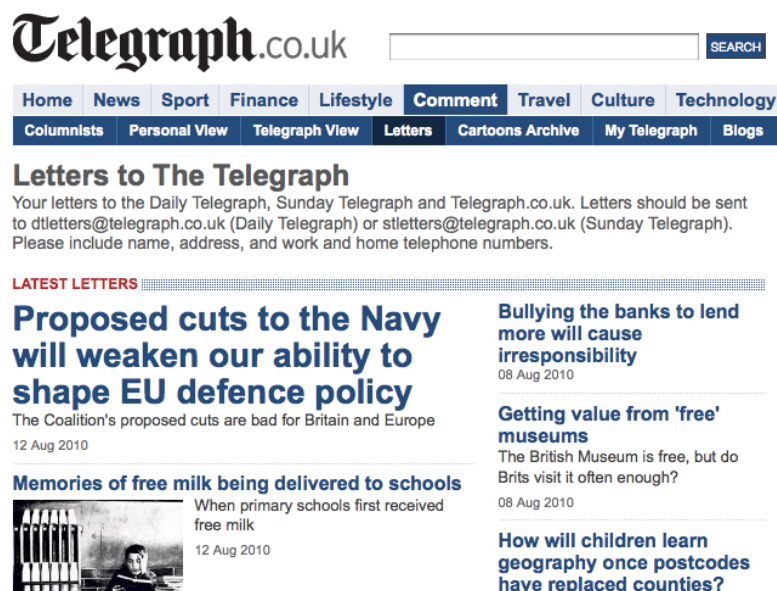
**Figure 19.** *Mail Online*: “Report abuse” and “Click to rate” comments<sup>44</sup>



### 2.5.2. “Digital” letters to the editor

As already mentioned, letters to the editor are a classic example of reader-news producer interaction. However, with new technologies in place also here a change has taken place. While in the early days readers had to send their views via traditional mail to the producers of news, the audience can now quickly and easily submit their “letter” via a simple e-mail address (e.g. [dtletters@telegraph.co.uk](mailto:dtletters@telegraph.co.uk)) (see Figure 20) or, as is the case with *Daily Telegraph Australia Online*, an online form, similar to reader response forms, is provided (see Figure 21).

**Figure 20.** *Telegraph Online*: “Digitalized” archive of letters to the editor<sup>45</sup>



<sup>44</sup> Cf. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1347427/Cherie-Blair-wore-pendant-ward-evil-spirits-No-10-says-Alastair-Campbell.html#comments> (accessed Jan. 15, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/> (accessed Aug. 12, 2009).

**Figure 21.** *Daily Telegraph Australia Online*: Online form for letters to the editor<sup>46</sup>

**Write a letter to the editor**

Use this form to send a letter to the editor, to be considered for publication in our print edition. Letters must be short and may be edited. All letters to be considered for publication must have a name, street address and phone number so their authenticity can be checked. An email address is not sufficient.

Your name \*

Your email \*

Suburb/town \*

Daytime phone number \*

Type or paste your letter here, then click the Submit button \*

**SUBMIT**

Boundaries become fuzzy and the question then is: In how far can we still differentiate between a “digital” letter to the editor and reader responses? For this purpose I will look at posting policies, volumes and levels of interaction, the place of publication, moderation policies and the treatment of contributors’ personal details.<sup>47</sup>

In regard to posting policies and volumes following difference can be noted: Reader responses are always posted directly on the website via an online form. Nowadays, letters to the editor tend to be sent by e-mail, but users can also – just like in the past – send their letters by traditional mail (or fax) to the editorial staff of a newspaper. E-mail though has become the preferred choice of communication. *The Daily Telegraph* editor Hollingshead (2009) notes that they receive on average 700 letters per day – 500 per e-mail and 200 by post or fax. In the end, around 20 letters a day are published in the print version of the *The Daily Telegraph* (Hollingshead 2009). This number highlights a key difference in regard to publication volumes. For example, on *Guardian Online*, one of the articles in my data set titled “Sceptics seize on climate cooling model” by George Monbiot<sup>48</sup> was published on the afternoon of September 16, 2009 and had already attracted 153 reader responses by the end of the first day alone and a total of 1,065 reader responses during the next 7 days.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/opinion/your-say> (accessed Aug. 12, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Language use is not considered in this overview. Consult Landert & Jucker’s study (2011) for a detailed comparison of the language use in traditional letters to the editor and online reader responses. Overall, they note an increase in language features of immediacy and orality in reader responses compared to traditional letter to the editor.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/georgemonbiot/2009/sep/16/global-temperature-cooling> (accessed Jan. 15, 2011).



Naturally, the manner of submission also affects the time dimension of the communication. While both are asynchronous modes of communication, reader responses are a much faster means for readers to get their voices heard (even if pre-publication moderation rules apply). In the above mentioned article the first comment was posted only 8 minutes after the first appearance of the article on the website. Letters to the editor in contrast have to go through a thorough screening, selection and editing process. As Fraas & Barczok (2006:28) note: “Es ist schon oft darauf hingewiesen worden, dass Leserbriefe in Printzeitungen wegen ihrer redaktionellen Auswahl, Kürzung und Bearbeitung einen anderen Status haben als Kommentare von Usern in online-Medien.” While letters to the editor are edited in regard to wording, grammar and length (cf. also Dürscheid 2006:113), reader responses are usually (if at all) moderated for appropriateness only. The Guardian Community Standards explicitly state their non-editing policy for reader responses: “We will not edit user posts to change the meaning, spelling, or anything else intended by the user.”<sup>49</sup> The screening process for letters to the editor also means that writers can never be sure beforehand whether their letter will be considered or not for a print edition. Also, in case a letter is selected, more personal details about the contributor are revealed than in reader responses. Instead of online commentator’s (pseudo)anonymity, letter writers usually need to provide the newspaper with their full name, their home address and a telephone number. This difference is also visible for the readership: While letters to the editor include a signature with a contributor’s full name and location, reader responses generally include a pseudonym.

The posting policies also have an impact on the level of interaction: While reader responses allow users to directly get in touch with each other and engage in a dialogic “many-to-many” interaction (Androutsopoulos 2005:118), letters to the editor can rather be described as a reactive form of communication (cf. Schultz 2000) directed towards the newspaper or respective journalist.

In regard to the place of publication reader responses and letters to the editor can no longer be clearly separated: While letters to the editor used to appear in print editions of newspapers, there is now a trend to also feature them as digital contents on the news sites. For example, *The Daily Telegraph* keeps an online archive of the latest letters (see Figure 20). Also the *Guardian Online* offers a growing online archive of

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/community-standards> (accessed Jan. 15, 2011).

all letters sent by e-mail to *The Guardian*, *The Observer* or *Guardian Online* (see Figure 22).<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the newspaper displays the chosen letters for the print edition in a section of the website.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, this new trend also impacts the level of interaction in letters to the editor. On *Telegraph Online* readers have the option to comment on archived letters via a reader response form thus adding a more interactive character to this form of communication (see Figure 23).

**Figure 22.** *Guardian Online*: Letter archive<sup>52</sup>

guardian.co.uk

News | Sport | Comment | Culture | Business | Money | Life & style | Travel | Environment

Global Letters

Letters

Webfeed

Letters by subject

- UK news
- World news
- Politics
- Society
- Education
- Environment
- Business
- Art and design
- Books
- Culture
- Film
- Music
- Stage
- Science

**All letters from guardian.co.uk**

**About this page**

This page, and its associated [webfeed](#) lists all letters to the Guardian, Observer and guardian.co.uk, independent of subject matter. Use the links on the left to find letters on sport, business, culture and more. Letters for publication about the Guardian or guardian.co.uk should be sent to [letters@guardian.co.uk](mailto:letters@guardian.co.uk) and letters for publication about the Observer should be sent to [letters@observer.co.uk](mailto:letters@observer.co.uk)

**Old and Sad winner**

**15 Jan 2011: Letters:** Perhaps those MPs who supported Ed Miliband's brother can now truly get behind their new leader

**Disabled people want their freedom too**

**15 Jan 2011: Letters:** they are not confined to their beds in an NHS hospital. They are free souls who wish to live their lives like others

**The Beilis blood libel**

**15 Jan 2011: Letters:** The blood libel continued throughout the middle ages, here and abroad, and indeed later

<sup>50</sup> To give readers an idea about volumes, the *Guardian Online* archive dates back to January 1999 and included at the beginning of the year 2011 a total of 26,518 letters (status Jan. 15, 2011). This is an increase of 1,200 over a period of 6 months (25,310 letters on Aug. 17, 2010). Again, this archive of letters is not comparable to the high volumes triggered by reader responses on *Guardian Online*.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2011/jan/11/mainsection/editorialsandreply> (accessed Jan. 15, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/tone/letters> (accessed Jan. 15, 2011).

**Figure 23.** *Telegraph Online*: Letter to the editor with integrated reader response function<sup>53</sup>

The screenshot shows the Telegraph.co.uk website. The main navigation bar includes links for Home, News, Sport, Finance, Lifestyle, Comment, Travel, Culture, and Technology. Below this is a secondary bar with links for Columnists, Personal View, Telegraph View, Letters, Cartoons Archive, My Telegraph, and Blogs. The page is titled 'HOME > COMMENT > LETTERS'. The main headline is 'Better a lecture from a policeman than a silent speed camera'. Below the headline is a sub-headline: 'Daily Telegraph readers share their views on policing, Gilbert and Sullivan, county names and Marmite.' The article is published at 7:02AM BST 11 Aug 2010. A red circle highlights '14 Comments' next to the article title. The article text reads: 'SIR – A speed camera does not stop you – it simply issues you with a ticket (Letters, August 10). A courteous police officer can stop you for speeding and give you a talking to – and possibly a ticket. We need more visible police cars driving on our roads, not hiding up side roads with cameras. You only have to see the effect of a police car on the motorway, cruising at 70mph, with a long queue of law-abiding drivers following.' A red circle highlights the author's name 'Duncan Rayner' and location 'Sunningdale, Berkshire'. Below the article is a section for 'Related Articles' with links to 'US policeman used Taser on 72-year-old woman', 'Range Rover 2010 model year review', and 'Speeding motorcyclist jailed after policeman uses Google to expose lies'. To the right of the article is a section for 'Letters' with a 'submit' button and a '10 retweet' button. Below this is a section for 'Ads by Google' with links to 'Criminal Records', 'Expunged Criminal Records', 'Criminal Records Search', and 'Criminal Records Check'.

### 2.5.3. Forum discussion boards

Similar to public newsgroups, originally known as USENET newsgroups,<sup>54</sup> discussion boards or discussion fora (Barlow 2007) offer users the opportunity to engage in interactive discussions<sup>55</sup> on a vast variety of topics. In the following, I will illustrate this written form of mass communication by means of the *Guardian Online* Talkboards.<sup>56</sup> These forum boards are also a form of asynchronous communication

<sup>53</sup> Cf. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/7937430/Better-a-lecture-from-a-police-man-than-a-silent-speed-camera.html> (accessed Aug. 12, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> “Newsgroups entail postings to a common public site, which can be accessed whenever users choose to log on” (Baron 2008:19). USENET refers to the network through which these newsgroups can be accessed.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. also the analysis of forum discussions on two French and two English news media sites by Lewis (2005).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/talk> (accessed Jan. 16, 2011). Unfortunately, *Guardian Online* abruptly closed the platform without further explanation on February 25, 2011. A *Guardian Online* spokesperson (Gibson 2011) says they are not allowed to share the reasons

and, just like in reader responses, allow (pseudo)anonymous users to submit comments to a broad range of discussion threads. In the case of *Guardian Online*, these threads are publicly accessible by any visitor to the news site.

While the submission of a comment in the Talkboard section does not technically differ from submitting reader responses (see Figure 24), Talkboards allow more individual freedom in regard to topic choices for discussion. In practice, the *Guardian Online* suggests a number of general topic and subtopic categories that are open for discussion. As illustrated in Figure 25, *Guardian Online* offers for example one category called “UK News”. In this category users can then choose “UK Politics” and even more specifically the topic “Labour Party”. Registered users can then go ahead and start a discussion thread based on their own interests and likings by simply clicking a button “Start discussion”. They may initiate a conversation such as “Should Blair resign?” (see Figure 25). Other users can then join the discussion and post their own views by clicking on the link “Post a message”, or in turn, start their own discussion thread. Here the Talkboard slightly differs from public newsgroups such as Google Groups<sup>57</sup> where users are completely free to start their own group and decide on discussion topics.

**Figure 24.** Submit a comment to the *Guardian Online* Talkboard

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[chillisauc](#) - 10:49am Jan 16, 2011 GMT (#8116 of 8116)

Paella Valenciana

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To post a message, compose your text in the box below, then click on [Post a message](#) (below) to send the message.

Post message

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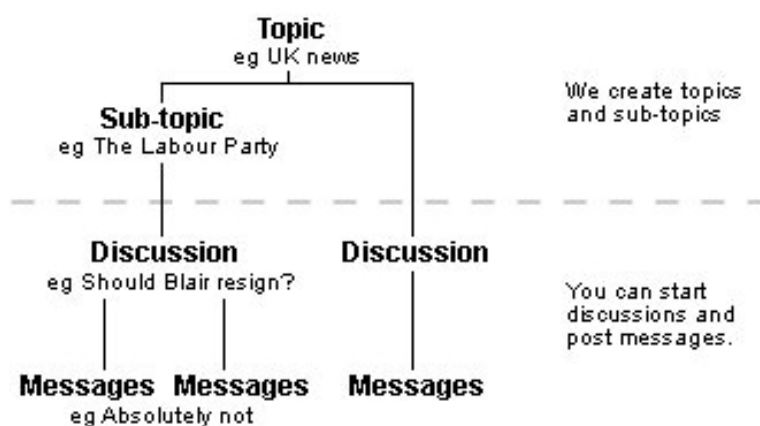
You cannot rewrite history, but you will have 30 minutes to make any changes or fixes after you post a message. Just click on the [Edit](#) button which follows your message after you post it.

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for the sudden closure with the community members. At this point in time, archives of the Talkboard can no longer be accessed.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. <http://groups.google.com/> (accessed Jan. 16, 2011).

**Figure 25.** Structure of the *Guardian Online Talkboard*<sup>58</sup>



*Guardian Online* Talkboards also differ in regard to the visual display of a discussion in comparison to reader responses. While users in reader response sections on *Guardian Online* only have the option to scroll through the entries chronologically, each comment on *Guardian Online* Talkboards receives a message number and entries are organized chronologically as well as hierarchically (see Figure 26). Users can also keep track of specific debates (i.e. newly posted messages) by subscribing to the respective discussion group (see Figure 26).

**Figure 26.** *Guardian Online* Talkboard: Layout and functionality of a Talkboard discussion thread<sup>59</sup>

GuardianUnlimited  
**The talk**

Home | UK | Business | Net | Picture gallery | The wrap | Weblog | Talk | Search  
The Guardian | World | World dispatch | Arts | Special reports | Columnists | Audio | Help | Quiz

**Guardian Talk** **Food and Drink**

Oy. What did you have for dinner last night?

[Post a message](#) | [Subscribe](#)

Started by **magumboots** at 12:04pm Apr 7, 2009 GMT

**Me? Beans and Sausages in a tin. It was so disgusting it killed the old thread.**

[Top](#) | [Previous](#) | [All messages](#) | [Outline](#) (8087 previous messages)

**Bickalonia** - 11:08am Jan 14, 2011 GMT (#8088 of 8116)

Sausages and chips from t'chippy.

**Otm5hank** - 11:20am Jan 14, 2011 GMT (#8089 of 8116)

Fish and chips and mushy peas too.

Cracking bit of cod too. And they left the skin on. I like it like that.

You are signed in as **LoloLuzzi**

**Tools**

- [Sign out](#)
- [Search talk](#)
- [Subscriptions](#)
- [Preferences](#)
- [Our talk policy](#)
- [Contact us](#)
- [Help](#)

**Other talkboards**

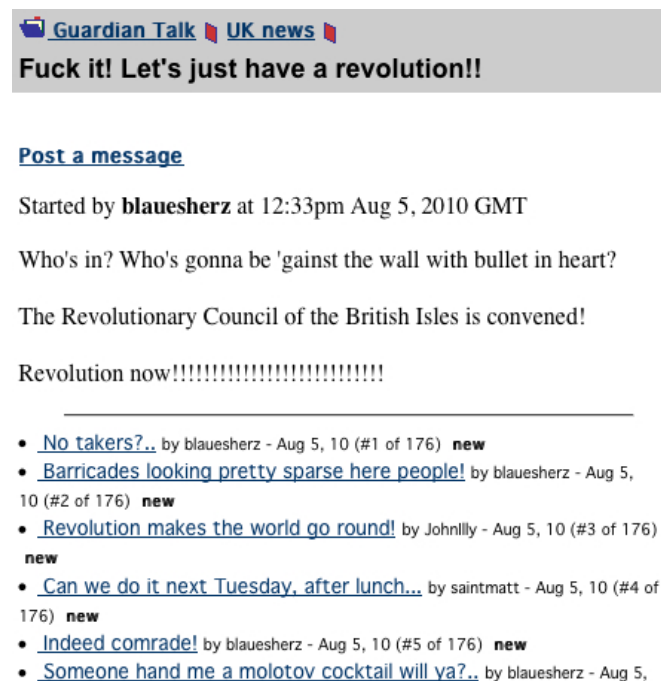
- [News talk](#)
- [Football talk](#)
- [Film talk](#)
- [Books talk](#)
- [Politics talk](#)
- [Education talk](#)

<sup>58</sup> The figure is taken from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/users/new-to-talk#1> (accessed Jan. 16, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. <http://talk.guardian.co.uk/> (accessed Jan. 16, 2011).

To keep track of longer discussions, the Talkboard offers users the option to view the outline of a discussion. In this format, only the first couple of words of each message are visible and users can scan quickly through a thread (see Figure 27). Users who would like to respond to another user's comment have to mention the URL (link location) of the respective comment in the message box. The quoting technique is also a feature of Talkboard discussions.

**Figure 27.** *Guardian Online* Talkboard: “Outline” of the discussion thread “Fuck it! Let’s have a revolution!!”<sup>60</sup>



Talkboard debates are also subject to post-publication moderation policies. Comments are checked for appropriateness and, despite more freedom for topic choices, users are still asked to refrain from posting “off-topic messages”. For example, if users start a discussion on German Politics in the category “UK Politics”, *Guardian* moderators reserve the right to move or delete such threads. *Guardian* Talkboard also offers “special guest events” from time to time. At such a virtual event, users can post questions and comments to invited guests. In this context, moderation is more extensive and pre-publication moderated. In other words, a *Guardian* moderator will screen and select questions the guest should answer in a discussion thread.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. <http://talk.guardian.co.uk/> (accessed Aug. 06, 2010).

#### 2.5.4. *Integrated news blogs*

Newspapers including the *Guardian Online* and the *Telegraph Online* also offer a wide variety of personal blogs.<sup>61</sup> They are integrated into the websites' content offering. Usually, blogs are "written by a single individual who combines all four roles of principal, author, editor and animator" (Jucker 2005:4). On news media sites, these individuals are either directly employed by the newspaper as reporters (see Figure 28) or they are external, independent and prolific bloggers (ranging from historians, politicians, magazine editors, writers, broadcasters to sports celebrities and cultural critics) whose blog contributions have been commissioned by *Guardian Online* and integrated into the blogs section (Figure 29). There, bloggers share their personal view on current issues. The *Guardian Online* and the *Telegraph Online* also offer thematic blogs like "Art & Design", "Books blog" or "Boxing and MMA" which tend to be run by a number of individuals (see Figure 30). Users who would like to leave a comment in these blog sections or interact with the blogger use the same type of reader response forms which are also available for articles. Thus from a usability and moderation perspective as well as in terms of functionality there are no differences between blog sections and reader response sections.

One difference may be in the level of interaction between the blogger and the audience. *Guardian Online* specifically encourages their bloggers to take part in the debates triggered by their blog posts. That is not always the case in the article sections of the newspaper as *Guardian Online* state themselves: "We encourage authors to participate in the discussions sparked off by their articles, when feasible. Obviously, for various reasons, this isn't always possible."<sup>62</sup> One could speculate that the different guidelines for bloggers and journalists on *Guardian Online* may be partly rooted in economic considerations. In fact, bloggers are not always on the *Guardian's* pay roll and thus often produce content in their free time. In contrast, *Guardian Online's* salaried journalists have targets to use their time wisely to produce new content on a daily basis rather than spending too much of their working time on interaction with users. Bloggers on the other hand often use their "free time" to indulge in interactions with users. Notwithstanding, also in blog areas it really

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Blogs on *Guardian Online* at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/tone/blog> and on *Telegraph Online* at <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/> (both accessed. Jan 16, 2011).

<sup>62</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/help/2008/jun/02/1> (accessed Jan. 21, 2011).



depends on the individual blogger's personal preferences. As *Guardian Online* also highlights there are bloggers that deliberately choose not to engage in interactions with their blog readership.<sup>63</sup>

**Figure 28.** *Guardian Online*: Personal blog of a *Guardian* editor<sup>64</sup>



**Figure 29.** *Telegraph Online*: Personal blog of a sports celebrity<sup>65</sup>



<sup>63</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/help/2008/jun/02/1> (accessed Jan. 21, 2011).

<sup>64</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog> (accessed Jan. 16, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> Cf. <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/sport/author/clairetaylor/> (accessed Aug. 09, 2010).



**Figure 30.** *Guardian Online*: Book blog run by a number of individuals<sup>66</sup>



### 2.5.5. Online opinion polls

While online polls are another opportunity for audience members to share their opinion with the newspaper, they are the least interactive talk-back communication channels offered on online media sites. In practice, users cast their vote by answering either a multiple choice or simple yes/no question. For example the *Express Online* asks its reader: “Which of the three main parties will you vote for in the General Election?” (see Figure 31) and the *Sun Online* wants to know: “Do you cringe or cheer when you see another celeb cameo on your favourite show?” (see Figure 32). Depending on the news site, users either need to be logged in to cast a vote (e.g. *Sun Online*) or they can directly and anonymously submit their vote (e.g. *Express Online*). After a person has cast her/his vote, *Express Online* provides users with a graphical

<sup>66</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog> (accessed Jan. 16, 2011).

visualisation of the preliminary results. This one-time exchange obviously lacks the dynamic nature of an interactive discussion. In fact, Schultz (2000) excludes this form of audience participation from interactive modes (see also Jucker 2005:205). Following his terminology polls should rather be labelled “pseudo participation” (Schultz 2000:209). While such surveys are thus reactive rather than interactive by default, *Sun Online* and *Guardian Online* succeed in creating a more dynamic communicative setting by also giving users the option to post a reader response to elaborate on their vote (see Figure 32 and Figure 33).

**Figure 31.** *Express Online*: Online poll landing page<sup>67</sup>

**EXPRESS.co.uk**  
Home of the Daily and Sunday Express

Wednesday 11th August 2010    Make us your HOME PAGE    RSS What is RSS?    SEARCH:

Quickly Find...  
[Home | Front Page](#)  
[MyEXPRESS](#)  
[Have Your Say](#)  
[News / Showbiz](#)  
[Sunday Express](#)  
[Scottish](#)  
[Sport](#)  
[Pictures](#)  
[Video](#)  
[Features](#)  
[Horoscope](#)  
[Our Comment](#)  
[The Crusader](#)  
[Entertainment](#)  
[TV Guide](#)  
[Money](#)  
[Motoring](#)  
[Travel](#)  
[Careers](#)  
[Fun / Competitions](#)  
[Promotions](#)  
[Cartoon](#)  
[Blogs](#)  
[Forgotten Verse](#)  
[Have a Story?](#)  
[Contact Us](#)  
**Polls**  
[- Online Polls](#)  
[- Phone Polls](#)

**POLLS FOR USERS**

**Poll**

**Which of the three main parties will you vote for in the General Election?**

☐ Labour  
☐ Conservatives  
☐ Liberal Democrats

**VOTE NOW**

**Poll**

**Has Gordon Brown calling a member of the public a 'bigot' for raising questions about his party's immigration policy made you less likely to vote Labour in the election**

☐ Yes  
☐ No

**VOTE NOW**

Gordon Brown calls voter a 'bigot'

**MyEXPRESS** Your news, your comments, your say! MyExpress gives you the ability to have your say, blog and chat! **SIGN IN / UP**

<sup>67</sup> Cf. <http://www.express.co.uk/vote> (accessed Aug. 11, 2010).

**Figure 32.** *Sun Online*: Online poll: “Approve of TV show celeb guest cameos?”<sup>68</sup> with integrated reader response function

Sun online Where are mummy and daddy? Asleep


Home Campaigns Sports News Entertainment Politics Crime Video

Where am I? The Sun > Sun Vote > Entertainment > Approve of TV show celeb guest cameos?

### Approve of TV show celeb guest cameos?

10:54AM - Aug 10, 2010

**AS George Michael prepares to be the latest famous face on hit show Glee, we ask if TV show celeb cameos are a good idea.**




Certain shows, such as Will and Grace, and Extras, are particularly heavy on celebrity cameos. Critics have hit out claiming that such shows merely hike on the popularity of the stars and fill roles which struggling actors would climb mountains for.

Others retort that celebrity cameos are harmless fun - good for the shows ratings, good exposure for the celebrity, and fun for the audience to scrutinise.

Do you cringe or cheer when you see another celeb cameo on your favourite show?

Cast your Sunvote below and tell the nation what you think

### Sun Vote big poll



#### Approve of celeb guest appearances?

- ☐ Yes - it's good for everyone and fun to see if a celeb can act
- ☐ The occasional one is okay, but not too many
- ☐ No - give struggling actors a chance to come through
- ☐ Don't know

Submit


Print Save Facebook Twitter LinkedIn StumbleUpon

### What Britain is saying

Most recent Highest rated First to last

You need to be signed in to leave comments [Sign in](#) or [Join now](#)

10 per page



I'm from California, USA. For as long as I can remember celebrities at times made appearances on tv shows like Glee. And some of the time, these celebrities are being asked to appear when the show's ratings are dipping a bit. Basically the term for... [\[read more\]](#)

4:53AM, Aug 11, 2010  
Sylverroses2010

Rate: 0 0 0 0

<sup>68</sup>Cf. [http://www.sunvote.co.uk/cms/entertainment/151199/approve\\_of\\_tv\\_show\\_celeb\\_guest\\_cameos](http://www.sunvote.co.uk/cms/entertainment/151199/approve_of_tv_show_celeb_guest_cameos) (accessed Aug. 10, 2010).

**Figure 33.** *Guardian Online*: Online poll with integrated reader response function<sup>69</sup>



<sup>69</sup>Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/poll/2010/aug/21/middle-east-peace-talks#start-of-comments> (accessed Aug. 23, 2010).

### 3. THEORETICAL SCOPE: IMPOLITENESS (ONLINE)

#### 3.1. Impoliteness and politeness

Together with its prominent sister politeness, the elusive phenomenon of impoliteness is located at what Culpeper (2011:5) calls the socio-pragmatic space of linguistics. Nevertheless, while the exploration of politeness has enjoyed unyielding scholarly attention at the latest since the seminal work of Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987), the study of impoliteness in its own right has only very recently gained scholarly momentum in the field of linguistics.<sup>70</sup> According to Sifianou & Tzanne (2010:663) the year 2008 could be called the “The Year of Impoliteness” thanks to a significant rise in the number of publications on this topic during this period including the first monograph in the field (Bousfield 2008a). By that year an important theoretical and conceptual turning point in the study of this highly complex sociolinguistic phenomenon had taken place. Impoliteness is no longer viewed as just the binary dark shadow of politeness. For decades, impoliteness was often not considered in detail as it was assumed that it was just the opposite of politeness or, in other words, the result of an “absence of politeness” (Mills 2011:24; 40). In Eelen’s (2001:98) words viewing impoliteness as a lack of politeness turns impoliteness into a “non-act”. However, the bulk of recent research has convincingly demonstrated that impoliteness can no longer be viewed as the dichotomous and inconsequential opposite of politeness (e.g. Bousfield 2008a; Culpeper et al. 2010; Culpeper 2011; Eelen 2001; Kienpointner 2008; Locher & Watts 2005, 2008; Sifianou & Tzanne 2010; Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2008). Watts (2010:44) describes this theoretical change as follows: “[I]mpoliteness’ is not simply the opposite end of a behavioural spectrum to ‘politeness’, i.e., that it is not the negation of supposedly positive values attached to ‘politeness’”.<sup>71</sup> Mills (2005:270) also argues that a binary view is not sustainable

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<sup>70</sup> Having said that, there were a number of important exceptions including Lachenicht (1980), Culpeper (1996) and Kienpointner (1997) that were of great importance for much of the work that followed in the field. Especially Culpeper’s (1996) framework inspired by Brown & Levinson’s typology was an important research tool for many consecutive studies.

<sup>71</sup> A prominent exception is Terkourafi (2008:46), who does not want to abolish the dichotomous conceptualisation of impoliteness and politeness arguing that “there may not be an interactional ‘middle ground’ one can safely straddle between the two.” Based on the idea that a person’s face is always present in any interaction, Terkourafi argues that a person’s face

since both phenomena have a different purpose in discourse: “[P]oliteness and impoliteness cannot be taken to be polar opposites since impoliteness functions in very different and context-specific ways.” Kienpointner (2008:244) for example proposes that impoliteness and politeness should be seen along the line of a continuum. In line with Locher (2006a) and Locher & Watts’ (2008) concept of relational work, both phenomena represent just two dimensions of many more types of “relational work” that participants engage in during any communicative exchange (i.e. politic behaviour). The term relational work can thus be used

to move away from a dichotomy between politeness and impoliteness. Instead, it is argued that relational work comprises negatively marked behavior (impoliteness/rudeness), positively marked behavior (politeness), as well as nonmarked, politic behavior which is merely appropriate to the interaction in question and not polite as such. (Locher 2006a:249)

At the same time researchers also realized that while the study of impoliteness is fruitful in its own right, one should and cannot lose sight of the theoretical groundwork established in the field of politeness. Culpeper (2011) describes this relationship as follows: “Impoliteness has an intimate, though not straightforward, connection with politeness.” Years earlier he (1996) had commented, “impoliteness is very much the parasite of politeness”. Though I think the negative wording is slightly unfortunate, he wanted to demonstrate that the study of impoliteness is nurtured by the scholarly advances in the field of politeness (cf. also Bousfield 2008a:43). Mills (2011:40) emphasizes that the two concepts need to be analysed in relation to each other: “Analyzing politeness in isolation from impoliteness is not justifiable, since politeness takes its meaning potentiality of impoliteness.” I fully subscribe to the view that it is vital to consider impoliteness in relation to politeness. At the same time we should focus our research efforts especially on impoliteness to finally give it the attention it has for too long been deprived off. In the following, whenever I use the term (im)politeness I do not wish to imply as Mills (2011:43) suggests that such a visual display creates the impression that impoliteness can be “subsumed” in politeness (or visa versa). Rather, I would like to emphasize that while both concepts should exist and be studied in their own right there is also a close connection between

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is also always affected either by means of face constituting or face threatening behaviour. What Locher & Watts (e.g. 2005, 2008) call unmarked politic behaviour would still be considered polite in Terkourafi’s (2008:71) conceptualisation.

the two. Kienpointner (Culpeper 2011:11) and Culpeper's (2011:16) suggestion to talk about politeness and impoliteness as a scalar concept fits well here.

Finally, recent research has also rectified another traditional assumption that was likely to be one of the main reasons why there was a distinctive scholarly focus on politeness for such a long time: namely to finally do away with the hypothesis that impoliteness is only marginal to human interaction (e.g. Bousfield 2008a; Culpeper 2011; Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann 2003; Kienpointner 2008). As Kienpointner (2008:244) puts it: "Among the most important results of (recent) research on impoliteness [...] is the insight that impoliteness is not a secondary phenomenon, that is, the marked, peripheral and exceptional counterpart of politeness."

### **3.2. Defining impoliteness: A challenge in itself**

[T]he very fact that (im)politeness is a term that is struggled over at present, has been struggled over in the past and will, in all probability, continue to be struggled over in the future should be the central focus of a theory of politeness. (Watts 2003:9)

In this section I am going to introduce a number of the most recent attempts to define the elusive concept of impoliteness (see also Locher & Bousfield 2008:3; Culpeper 2011:11 for an overview of definitions). The theoretical frames on which the development of these definitions rests (e.g. face, intentionality, first order versus second order etc.) will be touched upon here but discussed in more detail in the subsequent sections. The collection of definitions below is also meant to illustrate one major battle in the field, namely, there is still a lively debate of the very notion of impoliteness itself. A number of innovative approaches have emerged to analyse impoliteness ("relational work", "rapport management", "genre approach"),<sup>72</sup> and conceptualisations of the object of investigation are obviously largely affected by the different theoretical mind-set that scholars adhere to. Despite ongoing disagreement in the field, Locher & Bousfield (2008:3) identified a shared belief in a number of recent definitions: "Impoliteness is behaviour that is face-aggravating in a particular context." However, while the concepts of face and face attack have and still enjoy pole position in most theoretical approaches on impoliteness to grasp and describe the phenomenon, critical voices have emerged that also question the explanatory strength of this concept to sufficiently account for the whole spectrum of impoliteness

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010a); Locher & Watts (2005, 2008); Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2008).

behaviour. Culpeper (2011:21), inspired by Spencer-Oatey's (e.g. 2000, 2008) work on "rapport management", argues as follows:

[...] the problem here [...] is that the explanatory difficulties that surround impoliteness are simply transferred to another notion [=face/face threat] that is both itself controversial and, importantly, may well not cover all cases of impoliteness, or at least may not cover the central aspect of some cases of impoliteness.

Additional categories (cf. sociality rights) as suggested, for example, by Spencer-Oatey (e.g. 2000, 2008) may be needed to account for the full spectrum of impolite phenomena. I will return to Spencer-Oatey's framework and a general discussion of the concept of face in section 3.4.

The following conceptualisations are but a small selection of definitions:

1. Impoliteness constitutes the communication of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive verbal face-threatening acts (FTAs) which are purposefully delivered. (Bousfield 2008a:72)
2. Impoliteness can be considered as any type of linguistic behaviour which is assessed as intending to threaten the hearer's face or social identity, or as transgressing the hypothesized Community of Practice's norms of appropriacy. (Mills 2005:268)
3. *Impoliteness* occurs when the expression used is not conventionalized relative to the context of occurrence; it threatens the addressee's face (and through that, the speaker's face) but no face-threatening intention is attributed to the speaker by the hearer (Terkourafi 2008:70, emphasis in the original)
4. In those genres in which impoliteness is neither sanctioned nor expected, it is defined as '(i) the use of lexico-grammatical strategies or realizations of prosodic features not typically associated, i.e., not recurrent, with a specific (pre)genre and/or (ii) a disregard for the established, (pre)genre-sanctioned, norms and interactional parameters regulating the rights and obligations associated therein with a given individual/social identity which can thus be interpreted as face-threatening. (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Lorenzo-Dus, & Bou-Franch 2010:695; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010a:63)<sup>73</sup>
5. [...] 'impoliteness' should be seen as a first order concept, i.e. a judgement made by a participant in an interaction with respect to the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the social behaviour of co-participants [...] [We understand] impoliteness as breaches of norms that are negatively evaluated by interactants according to their expectation frames. (Locher & Watts 2008:77; 81)
6. *Impoliteness/Rudeness* is a kind of prototypically non-cooperative or competitive communicative behaviour: which destabilizes the personal relationships of the

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<sup>73</sup> See Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010a) for a definition of impoliteness in contexts where impoliteness is generally expected and even sanctioned. Her genre approach allows her to systematically integrate this contextual distinction into a definition of impoliteness.



interacting individuals [...]; which, more particularly, creates or maintains an emotional atmosphere of mutual irreverence and antipathy, which primarily serves egocentric interests; which is partially determined by concepts of power, distance, emotional attitudes and cost-benefit scales which are generally accepted in a speech community. (Kienpointner 2008:20, emphasis in original)

7. Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organisation, including, in particular, how one person's or a group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviours are viewed negatively – considered 'impolite' – when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly intentional or not. (Culpeper 2011:23)

While all of the above definitions demonstrate different approaches to define the concept of impoliteness, there are also some notable similarities. First of all the above definitions can be divided in terms of their understanding of impoliteness as a first order (lay person's perspective) or second order (objectified and theoretical analyst's perspective) concept (cf. for a more in-depth discussion of these two concepts see section 3.3). While such a distinction between the two notions is not necessarily an easy one (Terkourafi 2011:161; cf. also a detailed discussion of this subject matter in Eelen 2001:30–86), researchers' inspirational starting point and theoretical aim for the previously mentioned conceptualisations of impoliteness can roughly be divided as follows: Bousfield (2008a), Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010a), Terkourafi (2008), Culpeper (2011) as well as Kienpointner (2008) can be situated more towards a second order spectrum of approaches, but they do incorporate first order elements in their work to a varying degree (context sensitivity, hearer evaluations). Garcés-Conejos Blitvich's (2010a) framework explicitly attempts to systematically combine a first order with a second order approach. Mills (2005) is situated more towards the first order side of the spectrum of approaches while Locher & Watts (2008) most clearly follow a first order approach. However, as indicated above, such categorizations are difficult and only vaguely helpful without in-depth presentation of each researcher's specific framework. Also, while all researchers' theoretical aim is clear none of them appear to be clear-cut examples for one or the other theoretical camp. This reflects Eelen's (2001:30) thought when he criticized earlier models in

regard to their distinction between politeness<sub>1</sub> and politeness<sub>2</sub>: “[T]he distinction is neither a simple nor a straightforward one.”

Secondly, above definitions can be compared in terms of their treatment of the notion of face, a central conceptual unit in impoliteness approaches. Bousfield (2008a), Mills (2005), Terkourafi (2008) and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010a) (definitions 1. to 4.) explicitly incorporate the notion of face as central analysis category in their conceptualisation of impoliteness. Interestingly, definitions 4. to 7. by Locher & Watts (2008), Kienpointner (2008) as well as Culpeper (2011) do not mention the notion of face explicitly. Nevertheless, it becomes clear from their analytical research that all three incorporate the notion of face in their understanding of impoliteness. While Kienpointner (2008) adheres to the idea of positive and negative face, Locher & Watts (2008:96) equate relational work with face work. As mentioned above, Culpeper (2011) is critical of the explanatory power of face, but the notion still plays a crucial role in his framework to capture occurrences of impolite behaviour.

The concept of face is closely interrelated with a person’s individual identity, but only recently similarities as well as differences between the concept of face and identity have been considered systematically (for a detailed discussion see Spencer-Oatey 2007). Especially, the individual as a “social entity” (Mills 2011:42) has only recently been stressed explicitly in conceptualisations of impoliteness (cf. references to “social/group identity” in definitions 2., 4. and 7.). Here especially the interplay between an individual’s self identity in relation to one’s group identity or identities have enriched the understanding of impoliteness. The individual as a socially motivated and influenced group member becomes apparent: “The individual is seen as the nexus of social forces” (Mills 2011:42). Spencer-Oatey’s (2008:15) exemplifies the constant interplay between a person’s individual face and social/group identity as follows: “The attributes that people are face sensitive about can apply to the person as an individual and also to the group or community that the person belongs to and/or identifies with”. The author (Spencer-Oatey 2002:540) therefore also distinguishes between an individual’s personal “quality face” (closely related to Brown & Levinson’s positive face) and a person’s “social identity face”. This thought is reflected in Culpeper’s (2011:23) definition when he distinguishes between a person’s individual “identity” and a person’s “group identity”.

Next to the notion of face, speaker intention is also a central unit of consideration for a number of researchers. The interpretation of speaker intention by the hearer plays a central role in Bousfield (2008a), Mills (2005), Terkourafi (2008) and Culpeper's (2011) definitions (definitions 1., 2., 3. and 7). Having said that, there is one major disagreement among researchers in regard to the status of speaker intention for interpretations of impoliteness: Three of the four scholars mentioned above explicitly mention the hearer's recognition of the speaker's intentional aim to be impolite as defining feature for successful impoliteness. However, Terkourafi (2008) associates impoliteness with non-intentional behaviour. She differentiates between rudeness and impoliteness, and it is rudeness that is actually to be taken as an intentional face threat in her approach.<sup>74</sup> Culpeper (2011) takes the middle ground with his standpoint that intentionality can be but does not necessarily have to be a defining property for successful impoliteness.

Another approach to conceptualize impoliteness is to assess the appropriateness of a person's behaviour against the recognized norms (these may be pre-negotiated or situationally evolving norms) of a particular situation. In such a view impolite behaviour is understood as a transgression of these local norms and thus evaluated negatively by a hearer. Such evaluations are linked to the hearer's expectations about the need to adhere to these norms. The evaluation of norms of appropriateness plays an explicit role in all but Bousfield (2008a) and Kienpointner's (2008) definitions (definitions 1. and 6.). Terkourafi (2008:70) does not directly talk about norms of appropriateness but her idea that expressions need to be "conventionalized" against a certain context captures a similar thought. Scholars who adhere to the idea that participants judge behaviour against norms of appropriateness only differ in their description of the norm-defining/creating entity. While Mills (2005:268) talks about norms of a "Community of Practice" and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010a) of genre-

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<sup>74</sup> The conceptual struggle to define impoliteness is affected by a further disagreement in the English-speaking world regarding the use of the term rudeness as opposed to impoliteness. While Kienpointner (2008) explicitly uses the two terms interchangeably, Terkourafi (2008) and Bousfield (2010) like to treat the two as conceptually different even though they consider them pragmatically related concepts. At this point it remains to be seen how this discussion can be related to conceptualisations of impoliteness outside the English-speaking world. For example, Terkourafi (2008:61) points out that not all languages differentiate between these two concepts linguistically (cf. also Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Lorenzo-Dus, & Bou-Franch 2010:679–689; Locher 2012).

defined norms, Locher & Watts (2008:81) utilize the idea of “expectation frames” that every individual has. In their definitions, Culpeper (2011) and Terkourafi (2008) prefer not to define their notion of the norm-giving situational context in more detail.

Finally, yet another dimension to conceptualize impoliteness is the relational and emotional function that impolite behaviour carries. Kienpointner (2008:20) argues that impoliteness “destabilizes personal relationship” and “creates or maintains an emotional atmosphere of mutual irreverence and antipathy”. Culpeper (2011:23) mentions the “emotional consequences” for participants that are affected by impolite behaviour. Though the above excerpt from Locher & Watts (2008:77) does not mention the relational aspect of impoliteness, it is core to their framework of “relational work” that any communicative act is judged by participants in regard to its “relational status”. The authors (Locher & Watts 2008:78) argue, “communicative acts always embody some form of relational work.” In their view impolite behaviour is thus an evaluative judgment of negatively marked behaviour and represents an emotional response about the relational status of the message between interactants (Locher & Watts 2008:79).

Of the above definitions, Culpeper’s (2011) appears to be the most elaborate conceptualisation of impoliteness to date. Indeed it tries to incorporate the greatest set of dimensions to capture impoliteness in its complexity. Nevertheless, the definitional struggle is not over yet. Culpeper may be one of the best examples to demonstrate his own struggle with the concept which significantly evolved from his first attempt in 1996 (Culpeper 1996).

Based on above conceptualisations and based on my data I would like to propose the following definition of impoliteness: Impoliteness in reader responses is defined as situationally norm-breaking and thus activity type-specific inappropriate conflictive communicative behaviour that a communicative participant may evaluate as an intentional or unintentional threat to her/his individual or group identity face and/or a threat to her/his social rights. Impoliteness always carries a negative relational message. A participant’s sum of norms consists of pre-established social, activity type-specific norms as well as situationally evolving norms next to a person’s individually grown norm expectations through life-long experiences against which communicative acts are evaluated and judged.

In the following sections, I return to the previously discussed core concepts in relation to impoliteness to discuss them in more depth. I will start by discussing first

order versus second order approaches, then move on to face and speaker intention as units of investigation for impoliteness. This will be followed by a discussion on the concept of appropriateness in relation to impoliteness and the concept of relational work. I then proceed to discuss more specifically contextual, medium and person-related factors that I think are crucial for a thorough understanding of impoliteness in an online context and which were thus also of importance for the interpretation of my data. I will conclude the theoretical chapter on impoliteness with a discussion of two fundamental assumptions that dominated early (im)politeness work but are nowadays largely rejected or relativized by post-modern scholars: the ideas of inherent impoliteness and universal impoliteness.

### **3.3. First order and second order approaches**

As already mentioned in section 3.2 we can differentiate, though arguably not always in a straightforward and neat manner (Eelen 2001), between first order (im)politeness and second order (im)politeness approaches to investigate (im)polite behaviour. They are also referred to as (im)politeness1 and (im)politeness2. The distinction relates back to Watts, Ide & Ehlich's (1992) introduction of "first order" and "second order politeness" whereby the first was understood as a "normative, moral" notion and the second as a theoretical concept (cf. also Watts 2010:49). Since then the basic distinction between the two notions as well as the methodologies of the two approaches have been targets of criticism (e.g. Bousfield 2010; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010b; Eelen 2001).

At its core the (im)politeness1 approach,<sup>75</sup> also called the "commonsense view",<sup>76</sup> conceptualizes impoliteness based on participants' (=so-called lay people) evaluations of communicative behaviour. Thereby it is assumed that the interactants' judgements evolve discursively and that they are based on an individual's complex set of norms (i.e. the evaluation of what is polite or impolite is not determined prior to the interaction; cf. also Watts 2010). The (im)politeness2 approach<sup>77</sup> is driven by an academic's theoretical assessment of communicative acts. Ideally, this approach

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. for example Culpeper (2011:7); Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010b:537); Locher & Bousfield (2008:5); and Mills (2011:29–30).

<sup>76</sup> A label used by Watts, Ide & Ehlich (2005a:3); and Mills (2009:1058).

<sup>77</sup> Cf. for example Locher & Bousfield (2008:5); Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010b:537); Culpeper (2011:7); and Mills (2011:29–30).

should also allow for generalisations and predictions about the phenomenon. According to Terkourafi (2011:161), such a classification suggests that (im)politeness1 may be interpreted as “highly individual” approach since any person may interpret the same utterance differently whereas the (im)politeness2 approach appears to suggest that there is some form of “stable meaning” within a specific context which a researcher can analyse. (Im)politeness1 frameworks have been labelled discursive approaches since they no longer view (im)politeness as a stable concept but presuppose that meaning and the evaluation of behaviour as (im)polite are discursively enacted and negotiated.<sup>78</sup> (Im)politeness is then not considered a preconceived category.<sup>79</sup> In Culpeper’s (2011:7) words the distinction between the two approaches could be paraphrased as follows: The focus of (im)politeness1 approaches is on “how the lay person’s (or member’s own) conception of [im]politeness is revealed in discourse and not on how the lay person’s discourse fits a conception devised by academics.” In (im)politeness1 approaches, the expert role of the analyst as previously known from (im)politeness2 approaches is thus also to some extent questioned and less prominent for the analytical categorisation of behaviour.

Typical first order approaches by Eelen (2001), Locher & Watts (2008) or Mills (2005) also demonstrate a shift from the speaker and his/her intentions to communicate (im)politeness to the hearer who evaluates an interaction as polite or impolite (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010b:537).

In a first order approach to impoliteness, it is the interactant’s perceptions of communicators’ intentions rather than the intentions themselves that determine whether a communicative act is taken to be impolite or not. In other words, the uptake of the message is as important if not more important than the utterer’s original intention. (Locher & Watts 2008:80)

Vital to any first order approach is also the objective to focus on people’s specific use of all the different terms to evaluate (in)appropriate behaviour to build a model of (im)politeness (e.g. Watts 2005:xxii). In line with Eelen (2001), Watts (2005, 2008) therefore urges that these labels should be the essential starting point for any researcher to build a model of politeness or impoliteness. While this is a useful

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<sup>78</sup> See also Locher (2012) for a detailed discussion of the discursive approach in politeness research.

<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, though the label “discursive” primarily applies to first order approaches, there are a number of second order oriented approaches that could also be labelled discursive (e.g. Bousfield 2008a; Terkourafi 2008; see Mills 2011 for a detailed discussion).

approach, Jucker (2008:6–7) criticises that first order approaches should not be viewed as “prior” or “superior” to second order approaches. Interestingly, Watts (2005:xx) even admits himself that it is difficult to build a theory on lay people’s uses of evaluative labels since it is “impossible to operationalize those terms in empirical research.”

Criticism also comes from second order scholar Terkourafi (2011:161–162) who counters Eelen’s (2001:179) argument that (im)politeness<sup>2</sup> theories apparently created the idea that there is something “out there” that can be objectively discovered as a static concept and that such a view does not leave room for “alternative interpretations”. She (Terkourafi 2011:162) argues that despite the potential for a range of different evaluations, there is also some stability among participants since members of a community assume that certain norms are shared by the group: “[P]oliteness and (and impoliteness) do not generally remain in flux for participants themselves: participants typically do interpret each other’s utterances as polite (or impolite).” Bousfield (2010:107) even argues that it is paradox in first order approaches to focus on lay people’s point of views without admitting that those are also influenced by predefined social norms in regard to what constitutes proper behaviour: “[M]embers of [...] sociocultural groups tend to have an idealised, socially constructed idea of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in a specific situation and within a given community of practice.” Here Bousfield (2010) probably echoes Haugh’s thinking. The scholar (Haugh 2007:299) claims that a discursive first order concept of politeness like Watts (2003) proposes may in fact be a “theoretical notion masquerading as a lay conceptualization” (cf. also Bousfield 2010:108). Finally, despite the fact that lay people’s evaluations give researchers a glimpse into what is going on in people’s mind in a specific situation, even the evaluations by interactants themselves are not always reliable as Watts (2005:xx) also acknowledges: “[P]ost factum evaluations [...] might not correspond to real-time evaluations by the participants themselves during the interaction”. Continuing this thought, next to the fact that people do not always go on record, in specific contexts one may not even be able to rely at all on participants’ evaluations simply because a person may decide strategically that they do not want to share with others that they feel offended. Power dynamics and the level of acquaintance may play a role here.

While debates continue about the most promising approach to understand and theorize about (im)politeness, there has also been the realization that post-modern

second order approaches do not attempt to disregard (im)politeness1. Locher & Bousfield (2008:5) argue that (im)politeness2 approaches are a priori “necessarily informed by first order notions.” Most importantly, context sensitivity for norm judgements as well as hearer interpretation, which used to be associated with first order approaches,<sup>80</sup> are now also commonly used in second order approaches (Locher & Bousfield 2008:7). One of the most recent examples to illustrate the close connection between first order and second order approaches is Garcés-Conejos Blitvich’s (2010a) genre approach that systematically combines (im)politeness1 and (im)politeness2 aspects.

### 3.4. Face as a unit of investigation

With Goffman’s (1967) introduction of the notion of face and Brown & Levinson’s ([1978]1987) uptake of this notion for their model of politeness, the field of (im)politeness research changed substantially. Unsurprisingly, this notion still plays a central role in much of the (im)politeness research to date. Despite recent criticism of the explanatory breath of face to account for (im)politeness (e.g. Spencer-Oatey 2000) and continuing doubt about Brown & Levinson’s ([1978]1987) notion of positive and negative face as well as its apparent lack of universality and ethnocentric design (e.g. Bousfield 2008a; Watts 2005), the concept remains the most important means to grasp (im)politeness to date as Terkourafi (2008:48) suggests: “Face provides a common basis on which to build a unified theory of politeness, impoliteness and rudeness.” The centrality of the concept is underlined by Terkourafi’s (2008:49) argument that what researchers should focus on is not a theory of (im)politeness but a theory of “how face is continuously and unavoidably brought into existence, constituted and threatened through language.” Goffman (1967:5, emphasis in the original) defines face as follows:

The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share,

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<sup>80</sup> Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987), who introduced the first extensive theory of politeness, was frequently criticised for the interpretation of single utterances that were stripped of their context. A second criticism aimed at the sole focus on speaker intention that completely ignored hearer interpretation. Nevertheless, the framework was the point of inspiration for the development of consecutive second order impoliteness models (e.g. Culpeper 1996; Lachenicht 1980).



as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself.

Goffman considers the notion of face to be socially orientated and interactionally established. This means that one's face values are open to negotiation and renegotiation during interaction. It also means that the face values one can claim for themselves also depend on other participants' judgment and are not something that one can expect as a given prior to an interaction. Culpeper (2011:25) explains it as follows: "With Goffman, it is not just the positive values that you yourself want, but what you can claim about yourself from what others assume about you. The point is that how you feel about your 'self' is dependent on how others feel about that 'self'." Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987:61), inspired by Goffman's notion and the English folk term, define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself". Brown & Levinson further distinguish between two types of faces. Every participant has a negative and a positive face in interaction:

- (a) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition
- (b) positive face: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants.

In other words, while a person wants to claim personal independence with their negative face, a person's want to be accepted and liked by others is expressed with their positive face. Based on this distinction they built the idea of face threatening acts. They argue that there are communicative acts that inherently threaten the speaker's or the hearer's face (e.g. apologies, admission of guilt on the one hand and accusations, complaints on the other). Depending on the face threatening act, different types of face threat mitigation strategies can be used by participants (positive and negative politeness are two of the five possible super-strategies). Their model is built on the core assumption that people want to live harmoniously and be socially cooperative. Despite their groundbreaking conceptualisation of politeness and the model's innumerable application as well as inspiration for early models of impoliteness (e.g. Culpeper 1996), their view has led to extensive criticisms. First of all, Brown & Levinson's ([1978]1987) definition appears to be more static and centred around the individual compared to Goffman's original definition. For example

Watts (2005:xii) argues that Brown & Levinson's ([1978]1987) notion of face is distorted compared to Goffman's original definition:

For those who had read their Goffman, it was clear that Brown and Levinson had interpreted his concept of face selectively and had adapted it to their own purposes. In particular, they had transformed a social understanding of face into an individualistic one.

Watt's last point is also reflected in Culpeper's (2011:25) criticism when he argues that what Brown & Levinson ignore is the "social interdependence" of possible face claims that an individual wants since it will depend on other people's impressions of an individual. Other people's views will also influence the kind of face claims a person wants to make. Culpeper illustrates this thought with the concept of face loss. The essence of face loss is in the fact that it is other people's negative judgments about your face that makes you lose your face: "[W]hen you lose face you feel bad about how you are seen in other people's eyes" (Culpeper 2011:25). Among other aspects, Watts' criticism also refers to the fact that Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987) only chose to look at politeness as an act of face threat mitigation. Watts et al. (e.g. 2005b) and Locher & Watts (e.g. 2008) compensate this weakness with the notion of "politic" language. Also, researchers have criticized Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987) for their sole focus on politeness, and that consequently, their model is insufficient to account for impoliteness. Bousfield (2008a:56), for example, argues that Brown & Levinson's ([1978]1987) assumption that people have a desire to be cooperative and live harmoniously cannot account for impoliteness. Impoliteness is associated with the exact opposite, namely, the confrontational and disharmonious forms of communications. A revival of Goffman's original notion appears more fruitful for many impoliteness researchers. Culpeper (2011:6–7) argues that in contrast to Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987), who only chose to look at face-saving strategies, people that embrace Goffman's overall face work idea also have less trouble to account for impoliteness.

Another criticism often brought forward towards Brown & Levinson's concept of negative face is that of cultural bias (i.e. a Western point of view). The frequently cited works by Matsumoto (1988) and Nwoye (1992) on Asian and African cultures demonstrate that group considerations may be more important in the Japanese and Igbo culture than one's individualistic "wants" to be free from any form of

impediment as prominent in British culture.<sup>81</sup> Researchers argue that Brown & Levinson's ([1978]1987) face concept simply cannot account for these "collectivist" cultures sufficiently (e.g. Culpeper 2011:21, 26; Terkourafi 2008:49).

Finally, also independent of cultural considerations, the basic distinction between positive and negative face has recently been called into question. Based on his data of impolite discourse, Bousfield (2008a) argues the notions of positive and negative face interact so systematically that he does not see the added value of keeping this categorical distinction. He (2008a:143) explains that impolite strategies "often, if not always, attack, aggravate or otherwise threaten both the so-called 'positive' and 'negative' face aspects of the interactants (Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann 2003; and Thomas 1995)." Finally he concludes, "the dichotomy seems, therefore, unsustainable."

While Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010b:542–545) sees the drawbacks of such a binary distinction, she provides a number of arguments why the preservation of the two categories is still useful in the light of re-conceptualisation possibilities. The author (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010b:544–545) refers to Arundale's (2010) re-conceptualisation of face within his framework of Face Constituting Theory. Arundale (2010:2078) suggests a re-conceptualisation along the line of a more culturally sensitive notion that places the relational concepts of "connection" and "separation" between interactants at the core of his theory: "Face Constituting Theory explains face as participants' interpretations of relational connectedness and separateness." Terkourafi (2008:51) proposes a similar re-conceptualisation of face based on the notions of "approach" and "withdrawal" to capture what she calls "face2" (cf. also Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010b:543). The author (Terkourafi 2008:47) also argues that a person's face is always present in any communicative exchange. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010b:543) comes to the conclusion that the negative/positive distinction should rather be seen along a continuum: "This conveys the sense that there is constant tension between both, which requires that both be present, but one of them is seen as predominant in a particular situation."

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<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, the concept of positive and negative face also does not appear to be of relevance throughout the history of British culture. Jucker (2011:182) argues that this distinction became relevant during the Middle English period but appeared less fruitful for the Old English periods where social structures were much more group-oriented (e.g. kin loyalty) and less individualistic (cf. also Culpeper & Demmen 2011 for a discussion on the rise of the individual self as a notion in 19<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain).

In the light of the above criticisms towards Brown & Levinson's ([1978]1987) original conceptualisation of politeness, Spencer-Oatey's (e.g. 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008) "rapport management" framework gets rid of a number of drawbacks that are inherent in earlier conceptualisations of politeness and impoliteness alike. While her model was originally designed for politeness, Culpeper (e.g. Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann 2003; Culpeper 2005, 2011) was one of the first to adapt her model to the study of impoliteness. One of the major advantages lies in Spencer-Oatey's culturally and context sensitive yet universalistic approach: "I believe face to be a universal phenomenon: everyone has the same fundamental face concerns. However, culture can affect the relative sensitivity of aspects of people's face, as well as which strategies are most appropriate for managing face" (Spencer-Oatey 2000:12). In her view face is a multilayered construction that is related to "people's sense of worth, dignity and identity" as well as "respect, honour, status, reputation and competence" (Spencer-Oatey 2008:14). She is one of the first to reflect more systematically on the interface between the concepts of identity and face. While she argues that face is closely linked to a person's identity (Spencer-Oatey 2008:14), there is, for example, also a difference in regard to the elements that make up the concepts. Whereas people's face claims are only related to positive characteristics, one's identity is also made up of negative attributes. According to Spencer-Oatey (2008:14), the concept of face grounds on the universal human wish to make a positive impression on others, or to put it differently, the human desire to avoid negative judgments in regard to one's person: "Face is not associated with negative attributes, except in so far as we claim NOT to possess them" (Spencer-Oatey 2007:643). Culpeper (2011:28) paraphrases another important difference in Spencer-Oatey's approach to distinguish identity and face as follows: "[I]dentity is more situated within an individual, whereas face is more relational." Here it becomes obvious that Spencer-Oatey's conceptualisation of face builds on Goffman's (1967) interactional notion of face.

As my understanding of face is inspired by Spencer-Oatey's work, in the following I will introduce her model in greater detail. I draw here on the most recent complete description of her framework by Culpeper et al. (2010) which includes Spencer-Oatey's (2002, 2005, 2008) latest adaptations to her original categories (2000). Spencer-Oatey's (2008:13) rapport management is based on the idea that people have to manage communicative situations of "harmony" and "disharmony" with other interactants. In order to manage these situations three dimensions come

into play: “the management of face”, “the management of sociality rights and obligations” as well as the “management of interactional goals” (2008:13). These components may have a different weight depending on the respective individual, the situational context or culture (Spencer-Oatey 2008:16). In line with Culpeper et al. (2010) I will not consider the category of “interactional goals”<sup>82</sup> here in more detail as it does not appear to be as fruitful as the first two categories for an analysis of impoliteness. It is very notable that her framework is not just based on the notion of face.

Innovative to her approach is also the more fine-grained definition of face compared to Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987) as a three-dimensional dynamic construct of “face sensitivities” that also relate to the concept of identity (Spencer-Oatey 2008:14). Face sensitivities may again differ for each individual and situation (Spencer-Oatey 2008:14–15). As such Spencer-Oatey’s model can by default cover a wider spectrum of contextually sensitive impoliteness phenomena (cf. Culpeper 2011:21). Spencer-Oatey distinguishes between an individual’s “quality face”, an individual’s group face i.e. “social identity face” and an individual’s “relational face”. “Quality face” is defined as follows:

We have a fundamental desire for people to evaluate us positively in terms of our personal qualities, e.g., our confidence, abilities, appearances etc. Quality face is concerned with the value that we effectively claim for ourselves in terms of such personal qualities as these, and so is closely related with our sense of personal self-esteem. (Spencer-Oatey 2002:540)

“Social identity face” is defined as follows:

We have a fundamental desire for people to acknowledge and uphold our social identities or roles [...] Social identity face [...] is closely associated with our sense of public worth. (Spencer-Oatey 2002:540); [This type of face] is a group-based phenomenon, and [applies] to any group that a person is a member of and is concerned about. (Spencer-Oatey 2005:106)

“Relational face” is defined as follows:

Sometimes there can also be a relational application [in regard to face sensitivities]; for example, being a talented leader and/or a kind-hearted teacher entails a relational component that is intrinsic to the evaluation. (Spencer-Oatey 2008:15)

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<sup>82</sup> Interactional goals are described as task- and relational-specific goals. For example, in reader response sections the task is clearly defined: Namely, users critically debate the content of the articles and share their views with the public. Disharmony could arise if a person misunderstood the specific goal at hand in a particular situation.

[By relational I mean] [t]he relationship between the participants (e.g. distance-closeness, equality-inequality, perception of role rights, and obligations), and the ways in which this relationship is managed and negotiated. (Spencer-Oatey 2007:647)

“Quality face” coincides most closely with Brown & Levinson’s notion of positive face as it is related to the personal attributes of an individual (self-esteem). For example, if a person is called stupid, ugly or dishonest then a person’s quality face is attacked (cf. in reader responses, personal attacks on the veracity, cognitive skills and moral character of a person). On the other hand, “social identity face” is related to a person’s group identity (public worth). Culpeper et al. (2010:609) point out that the definition of “relational face” to some extent overlaps with the “social identity face” in regard to roles. Thus depending on the situation, an offence can either be defined in regard to one’s social identity or relational identity (e.g. an offence against all teachers vs. an offence against a particular teacher and the relationship he/she has with his/her students). Culpeper et al. (2010:610) further refine the difference between the two overlapping categories by saying that rapport in regard to one’s social identity face does not presuppose that a person needs to know all members that he/she identifies with.<sup>83</sup> However, rapport in regard to one’s relational face presupposes that a person has a personal relationship with a “significant other”. Culpeper et al. (2010) give the example of a person who is called a “bad friend”. Such a comment threatens the person’s “relational value” she or he shares with her or his friend.

Next to the three different dimensions of face sensitivities, there are also instances of rapport management and thus impoliteness that are not related to face but rather to “sociality rights and obligations” in Spencer-Oatey’s (2008:13) point of view. Here she differs significantly from other frameworks in the field that use face as the sole notion to describe impoliteness. The principles<sup>84</sup> of “equity” and “association” rights define this category. These principles relate to people’s beliefs about how interaction should take place.

The equity principle is defined as follows:

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<sup>83</sup> For example, if a Arsenal soccer fan reacts to a Manchester United soccer fan in the reader response section with the comment *Manchester United fans are all cheats* then this is an attack on a Manchester United fan’s social identity face but does not mean that the person needs to know all group members of her/his football club personally to be able to identify with them.

<sup>84</sup> Spencer-Oatey (2008:16) calls them sociopragmatic interactional principles (SIPs).

We have a fundamental belief that we are entitled to personal consideration from others, so that we are treated fairly: that we are not unduly imposed upon, that we are not unfairly ordered about, and that we are not taken advantage of or exploited. There seems to be two components to this equity entitlement: the notion of *cost-benefit* (the extent to which we are exploited or disadvantages, and the belief that cost and benefits should be kept roughly in balance through the principle of reciprocity), and the related issue of *autonomy-imposition* (the extent to which people control us or impose on us). (Spencer-Oatey 2008:16, emphasis in the original)

The association principle is defined as follows:

We have a fundamental belief that we are entitled to social involvement with others, in keeping with the type of relationship that we have with them. The association rights relate partly to *interactional involvement – detachment* (to the extent to which we associate with people, or disassociate ourselves from them) so that we feel, for example that we are entitled to an appropriate amount of conversational interaction and social chit-chat with others (e.g. not ignored on the one hand, but not overwhelmed on the other). They also relate to *affective involvement – detachment* (the extent to which we share concerns, feelings and interests). (Spencer-Oatey 2008:16, emphasis in the original)

The equity principle is a close reflection of Brown and Levinson's negative face category. While Spencer-Oatey (2008:16) views the equity principle more closely connected to the individual self, she considers the association principle to be more closely related to an "interdependent construal of self".

An infringement of the equity rights takes place when, for example, the user "Madasfish" orders the *Guardian* journalist Monbiot to *shut up* in a debate (example (72)). The journalist may then feel unfairly ordered about and that his/her right of personal consideration by others is threatened thereby. The idea of reciprocity, which is central to this category, also implies that if the journalist does not give orders to the commentators, then the commentators should also not give orders to the journalist.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, the order to *shut up* may also be interpreted as an infringement on a person's association rights that entitle any person to an "appropriate amount of conversational interaction" with others. Telling somebody to *shut up* implies that it is not worth listening to this person anymore and could be interpreted as a certain level of disrespect. Respect is yet another dimension that relates to the association principle (Spencer-Oatey 2005:100), namely, "the belief that people should show appropriate amounts of respectfulness for others". Indirectly example (72) may also be interpreted

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<sup>85</sup> Personal attacks which ridicule a person (i.e. personal attacks of the type "You are a joke" in section 4.6.8) are another example for the infringement of reciprocity rights. In other words, the reciprocal right to be taken seriously by your discussion partner is then violated.

as an attack on a person's quality face since it implies that the user does not value the journalist's work (cf. also a similar case in Culpeper et al. 2010:615). As this example illustrates, there may be significant overlaps between the individual categories. Culpeper et al. (2010:615) also reached the conclusion that in many cases multiple categories applied for one case. This problem was solved by assigning primary and secondary offences. In the analysis section I will indicate which types of face threats and sociality rights infringement primarily took place based on Spencer-Oatey's framework.

Also, I do not think it is necessary to divorce infringements on sociality rights from the notion of face. Spencer-Oatey argues that a threat to our sociality rights may simply be irritating or annoying but not necessarily impolite. She gives the example of a teacher whose sociality rights may be infringed upon if a student would push a teacher to do her/him a favour that needs to be done right away (i.e. write a support letter). In such cases, Spencer-Oatey (2008:18–19) argues, the teacher may simply feel imposed on and irritated but not face threatened. However, there is always the chance that a person may also feel that her/his face has been attacked:

On other occasions, however, people's treatment of us may not simply irritate or annoy us; it may go a step further and make us feel as though we have lost credibility or have been personally devalued in some way. When this happens, our face has been threatened, and we talk of 'losing face'. This can happen when people criticize us or oppose us, or make us 'look small' in some way. (Spencer-Oatey 2008:18)

So in a way, the example with the student and the teacher is more a matter of degree and may depend on a person's face sensitivities more than anything else. The teacher might as well have felt disrespected that the student would expect her/him to do something in such a short period of time and not showing consideration for the teacher's full agenda. While I value the more fine-grained distinction of the different aspects that can cause a disharmonious rapport, it appears that face issues and sociality issues are so closely interlinked that in most case we cannot really separate them. I therefore do not see the need for a categorical split between sociality rights infringements and face threats, as sociality rights infringements appear to have the potential for a face threat in virtually all cases. In my view, it is just a different kind of threat to the face than e.g. quality face. I do not see why a broad concept of face cannot capture social rights infringements as well. My thoughts are partly reflected by Culpeper et al. (2010:619–620), who put Spencer-Oatey's categories to test in a large



empirical study and concluded that though one dimension of rapport management may be more important than another in certain situations “[i]ssues of face and sociality rights overlap and are constantly at play in interaction”. For a further illustration of Spencer-Oatey’s framework with real life material the various types of personal attacks in my data set will be analysed briefly in terms of her categories. Whenever I talk about a face threat this may also refer to face threats in regard to a person’s sociality rights.

### **3.5. Intention as a unit of investigation**

As already touched upon in section 3.2 on the various definitions of impoliteness, next to the notion of face, speaker intention is crucial to conceptualize (im)politeness. Due to its centrality as a unit of investigation, in this section I will discuss the concept in more depth. On the one hand, in impoliteness studies speaker intention is used to describe the intentional wish of a speaker to communicate impoliteness, and on the other hand it can refer to the recipient’s recognition of the speaker’s impolite intention. Nevertheless, as already mentioned in section 3.2, despite its longstanding usage in this field of research, it remains hotly debated whether speaker intention is ultimately a necessary component for a communicative act to be evaluated as impolite. This critical debate is also reflective of a general doubt of researchers in the field of pragmatics who have started to question the overall value of Gricean intentions to investigate human communication (e.g. Haugh 2008).

Regarding the two major theoretical research camps, speaker intention is more closely associated with second order approaches. For example, Bousfield (2010:114) in line with Culpeper (2008) argues as follows: “I consider impoliteness to be intentional damage inflicted upon the recipient’s face expectations.” He further claims that intentionality is helpful to differentiate impoliteness from related but conceptually different notions such as rudeness, which he defines as “the unintentional damage inflicted upon a recipient’s face expectations.” While Terkourafi (2008:70) agrees with Bousfield (2010) and Culpeper (2008) that intentionality is a defining category of analysis, she takes the opposite view by arguing that it is actually rudeness that we can define as intentional. Impoliteness should be viewed as unintentional. Their disagreement shows that also terminological issues next to the status of speaker intention remain to be solved.

First order approaches do not think that speaker intention should be assigned so much analytical weight and claim that it is primarily the hearer's interpretation of communicative acts that helps to decide whether an utterance is to be understood as impolite or not and that such a judgement is always independent of the speaker's actual intentions (Locher & Watts 2008:80). This view is also reflected in Mills' (2011:35) description of researchers who take a discursive approach to (im)politeness:<sup>86</sup>

These theorists are also concerned not to delve too deeply into interactants' intention and what we as analysts can infer about their intentions and feelings, but rather they are concerned with what interactant display in their speech to others, what this can tell the other interactants about where they see themselves in the group, how they view the group and what values they assume the group members hold.

Mills (2011:48) further argues that researchers whose sole focus is on speaker intention will end up with a one-dimensional analysis of impoliteness. While Mills does not dispute that there are indeed intentionally offensive impolite acts, in her more recent work she also argues that acts can also be understood as impolite even if they were not intended as such by the speaker:

Theorists of impoliteness often focus on acts where it is clear to all participants that impoliteness is intended. However, it is also clear that a great deal of impoliteness is not intended to offend, but is rather more aimed at venting anger, expressing distress or complaining. Thus, although intention is an important element in this type of analysis of politeness and impoliteness, it is both intention and interpretation which are at issue. (Mills 2011: 48)

Thus for Mills both speaker intention and a hearer's perception are important for a thorough analysis of impoliteness. In cases of intentional face threats, Mills (2011:42) also briefly remarks that one may also label an offence as impolite when a speaker's intent is recognized by an interactant other than the target of an offence. Such a view matches well the reality of online forms of communication including the polylogue structure of reader responses. As illustrated in sections 4.4.4.2 to 4.4.4.4, in conflictive arguments between online commentators, also interactants who are not the target of an attack may feel offended and see the need to respond to a face threat that was meant to target another participant, the journalist or key actors in the article.

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<sup>86</sup> As already discussed in section 3.3, first order approaches can be considered discursive, but there are also a number of second order approaches that deserve this label (Mills 2011).

Mills (2011) view, as quoted above, hints also at Goffman's (1967:14) distinction between "intentional", "incidental" and what Bousfield (2008a:70) paraphrases as "accidental threats". Bousfield (2008a:67–73), who concerns himself with strategic impoliteness, would therefore not label incidental and accidental face threats "successful impoliteness". He still labels the latter two cases types of linguistic offences but would rather associate them with, for example, rudeness, hypersensitivity, a clash of expectations or a cultural miscommunication.

Haugh (2010:10) goes a step further and argues that speaker's intention and a target's recognition of this intention is not enough, next to the fact that often norms may play a greater role than the assignment of intentions:

[T]he view held by some scholars that impoliteness necessarily involves the speaker having impolite intent and/or the recipient attributing impolite intent to the speaker arguably underplays both the inherent discursivity of intentions, and the pivotal role (perceptions of) norms play in evaluations of impoliteness.

Intentions are inherently discursive in that while speakers may at times have particular impolite intentions, and attributions of particular intentions to speakers by recipients to offend may at times occur, these attributions can themselves be disputed.

Haugh's standpoint reflects a general trend that shows that the Gricean approach of attributing speaker intentions appears to have lost some of its explanatory strength in pragmatic studies: "Gricean intentions may play a less central role in communication than traditionally assumed" (2008:101). This development is to a great extent related to the recurrent argument that the identification of speaker intentions is a very challenging task. Sifianou & Tzanne (2010:666) conclude, "intentionality, is loaded with problems not at least because capturing speakers' true intentions is a highly problematic, almost impossible task."

One of the most striking examples for a change in perspective is Culpeper's reformulation of the notion of impoliteness in regard to speaker intention. While Culpeper used to view intention as a vital component (e.g. Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann 2003:1549–1550; Culpeper 2005:36–37), he no longer considers intentions crucial in his most recent work: "I am not now convinced that (full) intentionality is an essential condition for impoliteness" (Culpeper 2011:51). Such a view allows Culpeper to also define incidental and accidental offences as impolite. Even if not intentional, "people can, at least in some contexts, still take serious

offence in the absence of intention.” Culpeper (2011:69) concludes that he can also no longer subscribe to the idea that the degree of offence is related to speaker intentions:

[T]here is no generally strong connection between intentionality and the degree of offence taken: it is not automatically the case that X on a scale of intentionality equals Y on a scale of gravity of offence. [...] In fact, we should not get carried away with intentionality – it is but one notion by which people try to understand things.

He further argues that while it is a challenge for any pragmatist to provide evidence for their analysis, one cannot reject the idea that it is possible to partly reconstruct speaker intentions through contextual information. In such a view, intention is then one among many other tools that researchers should draw on.

In my view, speaker intention should remain an element in any consideration of impoliteness. Despite the difficulty for a researcher to figure out a speaker’s intentions, people attribute intentions in every day in communication. Whether they overlap with the original intentions of the speaker is a different story, but it remains a fact of human communication that intentions play an important role in the creation of meaning. Having said that, I would like to follow researchers like Culpeper (2011) and Locher & Watts (2008) that intention cannot be a prerequisite for a communicative act to be defined as impolite. I am convinced to limit impoliteness research to intentional face threats would seriously limit the study of impoliteness phenomena. I therefore think that incidental and accidental cases of offences may just as well be considered impolite by participants (depending on the context and individual etc.). This could be especially true for intercultural communications where impoliteness in some instances may be explained due to a clash of norms rather than speaker’s apparent negative intentions (cf. Spencer-Oatey 2008:43 on differences in rapport management across different cultural groups).

Considering that impoliteness can be viewed as a perlocutionary effect (cf. Terkourafi 2008:60) on the hearer, it appears crucial that the hearer’s interpretation should feature very prominently in any account of impoliteness. In cases where participants’ interpretation of communicative acts are not at hand, it also means that we need to rely on a multitude of other contextual tools to provide convincing evidence for interpreting empirical data in an attempt to reconstruct possible speaker intentions and hearer perceptions. I will say more on contextual factors in section 3.8.

### 3.6. Impoliteness and inappropriateness

Inappropriateness and impoliteness are often mentioned in one breath. In this section I am going to explore how these two concepts are linked together and whether all inappropriate behaviour can be labelled impolite.

Often impoliteness is understood as inappropriate communicative behaviour. In other words, interactants judge behaviours as impolite that do not conform (i.e. are inappropriate) to the situational norms and contextual setting. Referring back to section 3.2, all definitions with the exception of Kienpointner (2008:245) and Bousfield's (2008a) conceptualisations explicitly or implicitly subscribe to the idea that impoliteness is essentially about inappropriateness. For example, Mills (2005:268) describes impoliteness as behaviour that "transgress[es] the hypothesized Community of Practice's norms of appropriacy." Especially in Locher & Watts' (2008:77) relational work approach the concept of appropriateness is the central theoretical pillar of their framework that views impoliteness as judgements in regard to the "appropriateness or inappropriateness of the social behaviour of co-participants."<sup>87</sup> In their view, impoliteness is then inappropriate and non-politic behaviour (Locher & Watts 2008:79). Terkourafi's (2008:70) and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich's (2010a:63) definitions both implicitly carry the notion of appropriateness when they talk about linguistic behaviour that is not "conventionalized relative to the context" or behaviour that demonstrates "a disregard for the established, (pre-)genre-sanctioned norms". The importance of appropriateness in Terkourafi's (2008:60) thinking becomes explicitly evident when she explains that impoliteness has to do with a "hearer thinking that the speaker is approaching/withdrawing inappropriately – given cultural norms – whether this involves omitting an appropriate move or adding an inappropriate one." Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010b:550), on the other hand, suggests viewing impoliteness as an "umbrella term for inappropriate verbal behaviour". Though Kienpointner (2008:245) does not mention inappropriateness anymore as a defining feature in his latest conceptualisation of impoliteness, a decade earlier he (1997:255) argued that "rudeness could be termed inappropriateness of

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<sup>87</sup> Locher & Watts' (2005:17) view of appropriateness is largely influenced by Bourdieu (1990) and his concept of "habitus": "We argue that appropriateness is determined by the frame or the habitus of the participants [...] within which face is attributed to each participant by the others in accordance with the lines taken in the interaction." Habitus is understood as the sum of all experiences a person has had during their life (Locher 2004:333). These are used to make judgments about the appropriateness of a behaviour.

communicative behaviour.” Given that inappropriateness plays such a central role, Mills (2011:46) argues it is the duty of an analyst to understand what kind of norms of appropriateness are present in a specific CofP to be able to judge which types of behaviour could possibly be interpreted as impolite by individual members.

While Culpeper (2011) agrees that inappropriateness is a valid concept to talk about impoliteness, he argues that researchers need to be careful not to equate inappropriateness with impoliteness. The scholar suggests that indeed “most impoliteness behaviours are inappropriate”, but he adds not all inappropriate behaviour is indeed impolite: “Lots of things are considered inappropriate, but do not amount to impoliteness” (Culpeper 2011:1-2). Culpeper (2011:99) gives the example of inappropriate behaviour that is likely not evaluated as impolite: “(1) wearing a thick coat in hot weather, (2) hitting somebody and (3) saying ‘good morning’ when it is the afternoon.” This in turn, Culpeper argues, means that not all impolite behaviour is inappropriate in certain contexts. The scholar (2011:206) gives the example of “reactive impoliteness”. Drawing on Kienpointner (1997), he explains that reactive impoliteness may be considered appropriate as a “matter of fair defence” (Culpeper 2011:206). Considering conflictive impolite reader responses, one could argue that counter attacks by participants are less severe i.e. less inappropriate since they did not initiate the conflict. Terkourafi (2008:68, emphasis in the original) argues along the same lines when she claims that

[t]here are times when face-threat can be appropriate. Threatening the face of the addressee on these occasions is the shortest and safest way for the speaker to constitute his/her own face, because by threatening the face the addressee *when it is appropriate to do so s/he* displays familiarity with the operative norms and therefore claims to be a competent member of society.

Thus Terkourafi (2008) suggests that in such circumstances inappropriateness is not linked to impoliteness. Culpeper (2011:206) reaches the same conclusion and suggests that inappropriateness should not be included in a conceptualisation of impoliteness. I agree that the concept of inappropriateness may not cover all cases of impoliteness, and it is rather an umbrella term for a much larger spectrum of behaviour. Nevertheless, I think it is a crucial instrument that cannot be ignored since it helps to understand how participants reach a judgment in a large bulk of situations to evaluate something as impolite or not.

### 3.7. Impoliteness as relational work

The importance of the interpersonal dimension that impolite behaviour carries has been highlighted by recent research. Though not all researchers understand the concept of “the relational” in the same way (Spencer-Oatey 2011:3565), they share a common assumption that impoliteness is never just about the informational content of a message but always also makes a statement about the “relational status” of this message (Locher & Watts 2008:77; Locher 2012). In this section I want to give a condensed description of this theoretical view. For example, Kienpointner (2008:20) notes that impoliteness is a form of “non-cooperative or competitive” behaviour that is meant to “[destabilize] the personal relationships of the interacting individuals.” On the other hand, Mills (2009:1049) states about the relational impact of impoliteness:

When interacting with others, utterances which are judged to be impolite are an indication, not just of a face threat, but more importantly of the degree of solidarity and friendship between interactants, and the relative status, and more importantly, the perception of status difference, of the participants in relation to one another.

Also Terkourafi (2011:179) agrees that participants’ judgements of other interactants as impolite always carry relational costs: “[E]valuation never takes place just for the sake of evaluation; it is morally charged and leads to interactional consequences.” By this she means that once a person is accused of being impolite, the speaker has made a moral judgement about this person, and this judgement in turn affects how the addressee is going to portray herself/himself in the ongoing interactional exchange.

The interrelational aspect of (im)politeness has been most successfully integrated in the “relational work” framework by Locher & Watts (Locher 2004, 2006b; Watts 2005; Locher & Watts 2005, 2008) and Spencer-Oatey’s (e.g. 2000, 2008) rapport management approach.<sup>88</sup> Both frameworks assume that language always has two dimensions, “the transfer of information, and the management of social relations” (Spencer-Oatey 2008:12). Impoliteness is then just one of many more dimensions of how relational work/rapport can be managed.

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<sup>88</sup> Two other important frameworks of relevance that I do not have time to discuss here in more depth are suggested by Holmes & Schnurr (2005) and Arundale (2010). Holmes & Schnurr (2005) work with the concept of “relational practice” whereas Arundale (2010) thoroughly investigates the relational dimensions of face in his Face Constituting Theory.

Locher & Watts (2008:96) view relational work as “all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice.” Their view of relational work is mainly informed by Goffman’s notion of face and face work and goes beyond Brown and Levinson’s two-dimensional notion of face and face work (Locher & Watts 2005:13). They add, however, that face work can only be equated with relational work if it assumed that face work takes place in all types of interactions and includes “the entire spectrum of behavior” (Locher & Watts 2008:96; Locher 2006a:250). As such relational works encompasses all communicative acts since they all have a “relational load” (Tracy 1990:217; cited in Watts 2010:54) and range from “negatively marked behavior (impoliteness/rudeness)” to “positively marked behavior (politeness)” and “nonmarked, politic behavior which is merely appropriate to the interaction in question and not polite as such” (Locher 2006a:249). Impoliteness is then understood as a label used by participants to evaluate negatively marked relational work. In other words, behaviour that is judged inappropriate based on the situational norms. Such behaviour constructs or transforms the relational status between interactants in an unfavourable way.

Spencer-Oatey (2008), on the other hand, works with the concept of rapport management i.e. the management of harmonious and disharmonious social relations. She prefers to use the term rapport management because she considers this concept more extensive than the concept of face work. While face work plays a crucial role in Spencer-Oatey’s (2008) thinking, she argues, as already discussed in section 3.4, that face work alone is not always sufficient to describe what is going on during rapport management. In her view, also the management of sociality rights and interactional goals have to be accounted for in a complete description of (im)politeness. She further adds that in her view rapport management also underlines the interconnection between the “self” and “other” (Spencer-Oatey 2008:12). In summary, there are four types of rapport management orientations that people may hold during interaction according to Spencer Oatey (2008:32):

1. Rapport enhancement orientation: a desire to strengthen or enhance harmonious relations between interlocutors;
2. Rapport maintenance orientation: a desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations between interlocutors;



3. Rapport neglect orientation: a lack of concern or interest in the quality of relations between the interlocutors (perhaps because of a focus on self);
4. Rapport challenge orientation: a desire to challenge or impair harmonious relations between the interlocutors.

While Spencer-Oatey (2008:33) argues that it may not always be possible to separate one orientation from the other, face threatening behaviour and impoliteness can be associated with people's rapport neglect or rapport challenge orientation. In other words, people for various reasons may not sufficiently care about a harmonious relation with another interactant. For example, in reader response sections, participants may offend others because they do not know each other personally and therefore do not feel the need to enhance or maintain these relations. Also chances are low that they are going to interact with this specific person in future again due to the higher number of participants. On the other hand, a contributor may want to challenge relations because of a previous personal attack (Spencer-Oatey 2008:33). In such cases, participants have a real "desire" as Spencer-Oatey (2008:33) argues to cause disharmony. In conclusion, face and impoliteness can only be understood as fundamentally relational phenomena (cf. also section 3.4 on the concept of face) and both Locher & Watts and Spencer-Oatey provide valuable frameworks to capture this reciprocal dimension of impoliteness on a systematic scale.

### **3.8. Contextual, medium and person-related factors in the study of impoliteness in reader responses**

In this section, I am going to discuss a number of contextual, medium and person-related factors that I think are vital for a comprehensive analysis of impoliteness and were thus also of importance for the analysis of my data. Before I do that however, I will start with the rationale behind this methodological approach, which is obviously linked to my role as a researcher in the analysis of impoliteness. After this general introduction, I continue with a detailed discussion of those contextual factors that were important in my methodological approach and for the interpretation of reader response data. Among other variables, the activity type, the topic of discussion and established norms (debating norms, netiquette norms) will be explored. Subsequently, meta-pragmatic evaluations of impoliteness will be discussed. Finally, person-related factors such as the online commentators and journalists' roles as well as the historical relations among participants will be investigated next to medium-related factors

including for example the anonymous and public setting of reader responses. The chapter ends with a critical review of the notions of universal and inherent (im)politeness.

### *3.8.1. The rationale for this methodological approach*

In recent years the role of the analyst in the study of (im)politeness has been challenged. As already touched upon in section 3.3, researchers working with a discursive, and more specifically with a first order approach have cast doubt on analysts' use of pre-constructed (im)politeness categories. They also questioned the value of scholars' (im)politeness judgments if participants themselves did not provide any evidence in regard to how they understood a message. According to Mills (2011:45) the new type of discursive researcher can be described as follows:

The analyst within [discursive approaches] is much more tentative with respect to what can be stated with certainty about politeness and impoliteness. If the judgements of the interactants are the key element in assessments of politeness, then the role of the analyst may appear to be downgraded.

The author (Mills 2011:45) argues that this is a significant move away from Brown & Levinson's predefined way of analysing language. Part of this new thinking is the idea that no utterance is inherently (im)polite and therefore it is not possible to infer from the linguistic surface as an outsider what kind of hearer evaluations an utterance will elicit (cf. also Locher 2006a). Mills (2011:45) concludes that "there is nothing in the utterance which signals polite, non-polite, politic or over polite."

This trend has put researchers at a challenging position and also split camps between first order and second order researchers. For example, Leech (2011), who can be considered a traditional second order theorist, argues that he regrets the increase in uncertainty in scholarly thinking for example in the work of Watts and Mills: "[The scholars] in their own ways retreat to a position in which it seems impossible to make any general claims about politeness." It is his proclaimed goal to move away from what he considers a recent "inordinately tentative standpoint" in theorizing about (im)politeness. In his view, it is still possible to establish a "scale of politeness" according to which utterances can be judged as more or less (im)polite. While Leech appears to take a very traditional view of (im)politeness, a number of post-modern second order researchers have adapted a more discursive approach to their work and also consider first order evidence. They may still work with

preconceived categories (e.g. Bousfield 2008a; Culpeper 1996, 2005) but they are highly sensitive to any contextual evidence that may help them to interpret the data. I think, Grimshaw (1990:281, as cited in Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann 2003:1552; and Mills 2011:44) offers a very valuable view that takes away some of the doubts in second order theorists, who do not use participants' first hand evaluations as the sole source of input to theorize about (im)politeness:

[I]n the absence of the participants deploying and debating explicit evaluations of (im)politeness in the discourse that has taken place, some data analyses that appear in post-modern studies are selected on the basis of claims *by the researcher* pointing to implicit evidence that they involve politeness (or a weaker claim of 'potential politeness'). It is clearly not adequate to pose the analyst's interpretation as the interactants'; however, focusing on potential politeness or impoliteness does at least enable the theorist to point out moments in interaction where there is a potentiality for various forms of speech and levels of politeness or impoliteness to be chosen and understood. It is clear that we cannot access what is in the heads of interactants in any simple unmediated way but 'the availability of ethnographic context and of an optimally complete behaviour record permits analysts to make inferences and attributions which are ... no less plausible than those of actual participants.

Grimshaw thus argues that in situations where researchers lack participants' first hand evaluations of (im)politeness, it is appropriate for scholars to draw on the notion of "potential" (im)politeness in a specific context. Together with contextual data researchers have then the right to make convincing claims about (im)politeness as long as they differentiate between their own interpretation and that of the interactants.

Based on the discussion of first order and second order approaches in section 3.3 and the arguments in this section, my methodological approach is linked to my understanding of my role as a researcher in the study of impoliteness in reader responses: It is largely a second order approach in its design, especially since I work with preconceived categories of personal attacks. Having said that, my approach draws heavily on contextual sensitive factors and considers first order evidence wherever possible. I am aware that what I identify as impolite personal attacks may not overlap with the evaluations of all members of the reader response community. However, I argue that there is sufficient evidence that they do have the potential to be interpreted as impolite in the specific setting based on the contextual information and norms that are enacted in this setting. Also, the use of "impoliteness formulae"-like features or "affective linguistic expressions" as described by Culpeper (2011) and Locher & Watts (2008) (see section 3.9) add weight to such an interpretation. I do not

claim that such an interpretation will hold true for all members of the reader response sections. However, based on the evidence at hand the communicative acts identified have the potential to be interpreted as impolite at least by some members of the community. I also do not say that it will let me predict future behaviour's evaluations by all members. Nevertheless, it helps to establish at least what could be considered inappropriate behaviour in all likelihood within this context. By focusing on personal attacks not all forms of behaviour that participants may label as inappropriate or evaluate as impolite in this setting can be covered. Notwithstanding, I would like to argue in line with Sifianou & Tzanne (2010:664) that if I was to take a strict first order approach where participants go on record and show signs that they perceive something as impolite the overall larger patterns and dynamics of impoliteness in relation to personal attacks in my data may not be covered. In summary, where impoliteness assignments are not possible it can at least be claimed that personal attacks are not appropriate, face threatening behaviour based on the situational norms in this context (cf. also section 3.6 on impoliteness and inappropriateness).

Also the nature of the data needs to be considered when deciding on the best possible approach to investigate impoliteness. While it seems convincing to supplement any investigation of impoliteness with a combined first and second order approach that considers as many variables as possible next to the linguistic and para-verbal output, this is not always possible. For example, meta-pragmatics as well as participant questionnaires, focus group evaluations and post-interaction interviews are useful tools but are not applicable to every kind of natural data. For example, in my case, I do not have the means to get in touch with anonymous users posting their comments on news sites due to privacy regulations on the newspaper sites. A simple fact like that already limits analysts in their range of methods available to investigate the phenomenon in this type of online media. Post-evaluation interviews or questionnaires to illicit participants' judgments are therefore also not realistic. Also, one needs to consider that reader responses are communicated via a text-based medium. Here it becomes even more challenging to look for first order evidence since typical non-verbal or prosodic features of face-to-face communication are not available by default. New approaches are necessary for online data. While meta-pragmatics seems to be the most useful tool to balance an analyst's work and is a

feasible option in reader responses since one gets a chance to look at written evaluations of users, there is also a problem attached to this form of analysis. Haugh<sup>89</sup> (2007:312) quite rightly states that meta-comments do not occur so regularly. Also, while Mills (2011:48) agrees that “judgement is at the heart of politeness and impoliteness behaviour”, she sides with Geyer (2008:45) that concentrating on participant evaluations has its drawbacks since “participants ... rarely evaluate prior utterances explicitly as polite or impolite.” Unfortunately, this circumstance also applies to reader responses. Where explicit evaluations are not available in naturally occurring data, first order theorists Locher & Watts (2008:97) argue that alternatively it is helpful to “contextualise the sequence of social practice within a wider socio-political, socio-historical context.” This kind of practice is also systematically taken up by second order approach researchers like Culpeper (e.g. 2011; Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann 2003) or Bousfield (2008a), who advocate a close and careful examination of the co-text and contextual information in which such a communicative exchange takes place. This approach can provide fruitful evidence for a convincing interpretation of empirical data and helps to counter-balance what Culpeper (2005:41) calls the “instability” between linguistic means and evaluations of impoliteness: “[T]his instability means that impoliteness comes about in the interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic signals and the context, and so context must be fully factored in.” Here Mills (2011:46) agrees that “[t]he context itself creates the rules of interpretation and appropriateness.” Bousfield (2008a:74) suggests a number of variables that have proven useful for an investigation of impoliteness: “[T]he discursal roles of the participants, the context, the co-text, the activity type one is engaged in, previous events, affect between the interactants and [...] power, rights and obligations of the interactants”. Bousfield also advocates moving beyond the local level of investigation and trying to understand impoliteness embedded in a wider stretch of discourse (cf. sections 4.4 to 4.4.6 for a detailed introduction of this view and an analysis of impolite conflict development in reader responses based on his approach). That such a contextualized approach is actually not completely new is reflected in Fraser & Nolan view. They already proclaimed three decades earlier (1981:96, as cited in Culpeper 2011:121):

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<sup>89</sup> Also cited in Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010b:541).

[...] no sentence is inherently polite or impolite. We often take certain expressions to be impolite, but it is not the expressions themselves but the conditions under which they are used that determines [sic] the judgement of politeness.

Taking Bousfield (2008a) and Culpeper (2011; Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann 2003) as a starting point as well as Locher & Watts' (2008) concept of norm-based appropriateness and meta-pragmatics, I chose to consider the following seven dimensions of contextual and situational evidence to interpret my data of personal attacks:

1. *The activity type and Community of Practice;*
2. *The situational norms;*
3. *Meta-pragmatic evaluations of impoliteness by participants;*
4. *Person-related features:* Power, rights and role-related concerns, historical relations among participants, personality and socio-demographic factors;
5. *Medium-related features:* anonymity, public exposure and polylogue structure;
6. *The discoursal embedding of impoliteness:* Conflict development including reactions to offences (e.g. counter attacks, apologies etc.) (cf. sections 4.4 to 4.4.6);
7. *Linguistic level of impoliteness:* The use of “affective linguistic reactions” (cf. Locher & Watts 2008:95) or “conventionalized impoliteness formulae” (Culpeper 2011:256) including swearing and name-calling (cf. also sections 4.7 to 4.8.2).

In the following I will introduce the contextual and situational dimensions 1. – 5. in depth in this chapter. It is assumed that these factors, which are part of the specific communicative and medial conditions of reader responses, will influence the language use (cf. Koch & Oesterreicher 2007; Herring 2007). Consequently, these variables may also impact the realization and interpretation of impoliteness in my data set. The analysis dimension 6. on impoliteness in conflict development and the analysis dimension 7. on the linguistic level of impoliteness will not be introduced here but discussed in-depth in the analysis chapter 4. by means of illustrative empirical data.

In summary, what I would like to offer here is an identification of recurring

patterns of means (i.e. specific types of personal attacks) that have the potential force to be considered impolite by one, some, or all participants in the specific context under investigation. In a very different situation the same means may be considered appropriate by interlocutors and may thus also not have the same negative perlocutionary effect. As such the approach offers a hypothetical model which allows to provide explanations for plausible intentions of speakers and perceptions of hearers in the data here analysed. In impoliteness research, like in many other fields of linguistic research, it is crucial, however challenging it may be, to understand the dynamics of the context in which a communication takes place and identify those elements in a given situation that do appear to have an effect on the meaning and thus interpretation of a given utterance.

### *3.8.2. The activity type and Community of Practice*

The type of conversation that interactants engage in can have an impact on the interpretation of impoliteness. Researchers work with different concepts such as the notions of activity type and Community of Practice (CofP)<sup>90</sup> to capture these types of conversations systematically. A common assumption is that the nature of the conversation is a factor that may be decisive in whether a person will evaluate something as impolite or not. There are situations where impoliteness is an expected and thus “sanctioned” form of behaviour, for example in army training discourse (cf. Culpeper 1996; 2005). Culpeper (1996:359) argues that in this strongly hierarchical institution “impoliteness” is used strategically by senior officers to “destroy the recruits individuality and self-esteem”. By means of such practices, future soldiers will settle well into a system where orders from above need to be executed without question (Culpeper 1996:359). Political interviews and debates as well as interactions between traffic wardens and citizens are two further types of discourses where impoliteness have been found to be part of the expected behaviour (Culpeper,

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<sup>90</sup> Prior to the establishment of a CofP we could even talk about a “nexus of practice” (Scollon 2001: 388-389). This is a more “loosely structured” group than a CofP since it evolves around specific actions. For example a group may be linked together by the knowledge of e.g. “how to have a cup of coffee” in a café or “how to send an e-mail message”. In the reader response community members share the practice of knowing how to contribute their view to current news items. We may also differentiate between regular and one-off contributors that will be more or less familiar with the nexus of practice or CofP.

Bousfield, & Wichmann 2003; Bousfield 2008a; Locher & Watts 2008; Kienpointner 2008).

Two of the most common ways to systematically capture types of discourses and associated communicative behaviours are the concept of activity type and CofP.<sup>91</sup> In their impoliteness research, both Culpeper (2005, 2011) and Bousfield (2008a) build on Levinson's (1979) pragmatic concept of activity type. This concept presupposes that "the meaning of an utterance involves knowing the activity within which those utterances play a role" (Culpeper 2005:65). Levinson (1979:368, emphasis in the original) defines activity type as follows:

I take the notion of an activity type to refer to a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with *constraints* on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions. Paradigm examples would be teaching, a job interview, a jural interrogation, a football game, a task in a workshop, a dinner party and so on.

Thus, central to an activity type are the "allowable" or in other words "appropriate" communicative moves in an interaction. Culpeper (2011:96) argues that Levinson's concept further carries resemblance with Schank & Abelson's (1977:41) idea of discourse "script": "A structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context." Based on this idea, one can argue that sequences that are not expected and therefore arguably not appropriate according to the activity type or "script" may trigger interpretations of impoliteness by interactants.

Mills works with another useful concept called CofP, which was introduced to capture more fine-grained social and cultural group structures for the interpretation of communicative behaviour of individuals. The author (Mills 2009:1057–1058) argues that this concept allows a "focus on 'punctual' or contextualized analysis ... without

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<sup>91</sup> Recently, the concept of "genre" has also found application in impoliteness studies. This concept, which I will not discuss in more detail for reasons of space, shares similarities with the notions of activity type (Levinson 1979), discursive scripts (Schank & Abelson 1977) and "frames" (e.g. Terkourafi 2001) and has recently been introduced by Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010a:52) as an integral concept in her analytical framework of impoliteness. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich's (2010a:52) definition of "genre" is largely inspired by Swales (1990:58): "A class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style ... exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience."



falling prey to large scale generalisations about all of the individuals in a particular language group or culture.” Mills (2011:31) defines CofPs as follows:

[T]he language practices which are developed within particular groups of people who are engaged on a task together, and in the process of their interaction about that task they constitute themselves as a group and as a group which has particular language practices and styles. ... the focus on the community of practice makes it possible to see that different communities construct different norms for what is appropriate or inappropriate; in essence, what counts as polite or impolite.

While Mills thus uses a slightly different reference frame compared to Bousfield (2008a) and Culpeper (2011) (i.e. CofP versus activity type) to judge language behaviour, the idea of “allowable contributions” is also reflected in Mills thinking when she talks about “norms” that help interactants decide on “what is appropriate or inappropriate.” Based on the idea of “allowable contributions” it could then be assumed that unexpected behaviour will be interpreted as inappropriate and consequently impolite in specific activity types/CofPs. According to Mills (2003:126) this in turn could mean that, for example, impolite behaviour in military training context could be interpreted as appropriate since it is part of the expectable “allowable contributions”. Consequently evaluations of impoliteness may not be made in this CofP since “recruits recognise that these forms of speech are simply part of the discourse genre of that particular community of practice.” While the notion of activity type and CofP may thus be very valuable tools to understand how evaluations of impoliteness are constructed, Culpeper (2005, 2011) and Bousfield (2010) both refute Mills’ argument that just because impoliteness is “sanctioned” and thus normal in certain activity types/CofPs, it is also automatically “neutralized”. Culpeper (2011:217) states: “What concerns me is that people can and do still take offence in such situations, even if there are theoretical reasons why they should not.” Bousfield (2010:105, emphasis in original) is in line with Culpeper (2011) when he says:

[F]ace-damaging behaviour can be ‘normal’ in a given community of practice. One just has to consider abusive relationships to think of situations in which linguistic (and potentially physical/sexual) ‘hurt’ or ‘aggression’ is a staple of regular, even daily existence for some individuals. Just because [face-damaging behaviour] is normal ... does not in any way either *sanction* or *neutralize* the harm caused. By the same token, face-threat can be normal and central to the discourse type and be *sanctioned*; or be normal and central to the discourse type and *not sanctioned*, and in neither case need it be necessarily *neutralised*.

Based on the above discussion, reader response debates can be defined as an individual activity type with its own CofP norms and specific language practices.

Bousfield (2008a:171–173) suggests a number of aspects that can be considered for any activity type. I will discuss the goals of interactants, the allowable contributions, turn-taking and topic control in more detail. The goal (cf. Bousfield 2008a:171–172) of the participants in reader response sections is to critically discuss current news issues and publicly share their opinions with a wide audience as well as newspaper representatives. The goal task of the journalists is to offer news items that engage the audience members and offer opportunities for discussions among audience members. They may occasionally also want to actively participate in the discussions themselves to respond to reader comments, verify information or answer questions from participants. The allowable contributions are roughly laid out in the newspaper's netiquette and public debating rules (cf. section 3.8.3 for a more detailed discussion thereof) though the execution of these norm-giving rules is handled differently across the newspaper sites. Not adhering to the debating rules may result in censorship of contributions through the newspaper moderation team or the reporting of inappropriate participants by a co-commentator to the newspaper. Also, since it is an international audience, users bring with them different cultural and individual norm expectations about allowable contributions in this public online debating setting (cf. section 3.8.3 for a more detailed discussion thereof). Different norm expectations may lead to clashes and evaluations of impoliteness. Crucial to this activity type are also medium constraints that affect the communicative dynamics. Turn-taking (cf. Bousfield 2008a:171; 173) in this activity type works asynchronously and in a non-linear fashion. In other words, contributions are added chronologically and may not appear right next to the comment a person wants to refer to or may appear at a later stage due to pre-publication moderation. Also, with some newspapers, commentators are constrained in the number of characters they can use per contribution. Topic control (cf. Bousfield 2008a:171; 173) is also an important feature of this activity type. The newspaper generally decides on what topics are open for reader response discussion and what are considered relevant contributions to a discussion thread. Participants may suggest topics of interest to the newspaper or start their own discussion in other community areas of the newspaper (e.g. discussion boards), but it remains in the hands of the editorial team to decide what topic is appropriate for debate. Off-topic contributions may attract the disapproval of co-participants or might end in censorship. Spencer-Oatey (2008:21) argues that “topic choice and topic management” have to be handled with care since for example “sudden changes in

topic” may be considered “rapport-threatening”. Also, the editorial’s topic choice may affect the kind of contributions. Spencer-Oatey (2008:21) argues that sensitive topics can also negatively affect rapport. For example religious, political, environmental or ethical issues may trigger more emotionally charged reactions from contributors. In turn, they may be experienced as inappropriate and offensive by co-participants and/or the journalists. In his study of Usenet newsgroup discussions, Kayany (1998:1135) concluded that the topic of a discussion affected the occurrence of inappropriate behaviour.<sup>92</sup> Having said that, it is very hard to judge where to draw a line between sensitive and non-sensitive topics since this largely depends on the individual participant’s cultural and personal values. My data sample is also too small in terms of topic variety to draw safe conclusions about the influence of this factor. In summary, both concepts, the activity type and CofP, are pivotal tools to support any analysis of impoliteness in a given data set.

### 3.8.3. *The situational norms: Person-related norms, netiquette<sup>93</sup> and moderation rules*

A number of situational norms and norm expectations apply in this CofP/activity type. Against these norms communicative behaviour will be evaluated in regard to its appropriateness and judgments of impoliteness will be made. It may in turn also affect participants’ realizations of impoliteness. These norms are central for any researcher that wants to study impoliteness. Reader responses may be affected by a set of more general norms that could apply to many types of discourses and those more specifically constructed in this activity type. At the general level, reader responses

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<sup>92</sup> In the study Kayany (1998) worked with the concept of flaming incidents.

<sup>93</sup> The here discussed newspapers community netiquette and moderation rules applied during the period of data collection in September 2009. Information and direct quotes were taken from following sources:

1. *Express Online* <http://www.express.co.uk/myexpress/termsandconditions> (accessed Sep. 20, 2009).
2. *Guardian Online* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/community-standards> (accessed Sep. 20, 2009).
3. *Mail Online* [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/house\\_rules.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/house_rules.html) (accessed Sep. 20, 2009).
4. *Sun Online* <http://www.mysun.co.uk/help/faq> (accessed Sep. 20, 2009).
5. *Telegraph Online* <http://my.telegraph.co.uk/aboutus/mytelegraph/12/moderation-faqs> (accessed Sep. 20, 2009).

will be judged against an abundance of personally evolved and culturally coded norm expectations and values that any participant in a large and heterogeneous community carries with them (cf. also Locher 2012). As Mills (2009:1058) states, no CofP exists “in isolation, from other groups and larger language groups and cultural values.” Next, since reader responses are situated in a publicly accessible space, they may be judged against public discourse norms. Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2011:2579) give the example of “ideologically supported hostility” against other interactants which violates public discourse norms, for example, in YouTube postings. It is argued that “norms of public discourse civility underlie assessments of (im)polite/politic behaviour in YouTube” (Lorenzo-Dus, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, & Bou-Franch 2011:2590). The same circumstance applies to reader response discourse. The *Guardian Online* community standards explicitly talk about this point:

We will not tolerate racism, sexism, homophobia or other forms of hate-speech, or contributions that could be interpreted as such. We recognize the difference between criticising a particular government, organisation, community or belief and attacking people on the basis of their race, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability or age.

Part of public discourse norms is also the idea of “free speech” as Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2011:2579) note. However, while newspapers support the idea of free speech, they also have legal obligations and a responsibility towards their readership audience and commentators to monitor the level of free speech in reader response sections. Participants are made aware of this in the community rules. The *Telegraph Online* standards read as follows:

Free speech is an important value to us and we know that it is to you too. However, that doesn't mean we can drop all restrictions. Some of these restrictions are there for legal reasons, others are there to stop the site becoming unpleasant. If you don't like the restrictions we place on comments, there are other places online where you can comment without any moderation at all.

*Express Online* also talks about their legal obligations to report offenders to the respective authorities:

Please keep your comments legal. We will remove comments that incite people to commit a crime and we could be legally obliged to reveal your registration information and/or IP address to the authorities.

Example (1)<sup>94</sup> illustrates that commentator “Russell Taylor” is clearly aware of moderation policies on the site and the limits of free speech in his treatment of other commentators:

(1) Would have no chance of this comment being published if I wrote what I thought of this comment.

(*Mail Online*, September 09, 2009, “Premature\_baby\_0017”)

User “Scraggs1962” also realizes that his/her comment goes far beyond what is considered appropriate behaviour in this public reader response sections:

(2) this SXXT government send our troops to their deaths and those who suffer appalling injuries,with the excuse”they are there to keep us safe from terrorism”. The filthy PIGS have been here for a generation at least,plotting,and carrying out their outrages.Do what saudi does,cut off their heads.End of.Bet this is not published.Wouldn’t be PC,Would it ?

(*Sun Online*, September 09, 2009, “Fantatics\_go\_free\_0016”)

This example also shows that by far not all abusive comments are spotted on time by the moderation team.

The rules described above are part of a large set of netiquette guidelines that each newspaper has established for appropriate and thus acceptable behaviour in the community areas of newspapers. They are in fact a conglomerate of previously established and evolving norms as Terkourafi (2011:176) states: “Netiquette – [has] been shaped, in dialogue with both previous genres and the social conditions of the time.” Public discourse norms and legal norms would fall into the first category whereas rules that are specifically constructed based on the needs of this activity type would account for the second type. That also means that participants help to shape the second type of norms against which future behaviour will be judged.

Specific to this activity type is the custom to disagree with other participants and criticize news affairs. In this context it is acceptable and normal behaviour. However, there are boundaries of appropriateness. The *Mail Online* community standards say:

We welcome your opinions. We want our readers to see and understand different points of view. ... You can express a strong opinion but please do not go over the top.

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<sup>94</sup> See section 4.1 on the conventions used for citing source references of linguistic examples from my data set.

Here *Mail Online* hints at another rule that states that “no libel or other abuse” is allowed. *Guardian Online* community standards reflect the same spirit as *Mail Online* to allow for a colourful range of different voices, but they also have installed limits as to what can be no longer considered appropriate behaviour on their platform:

We welcome debate and dissent, but personal attacks (on authors, other users or any individual), persistent trolling and mindless abuse will not be tolerated.

Similarly, while *Telegraph Online* is open to criticism towards their newspaper they moderate comments that contain personal abuse. The answer in the FAQ section regarding the question: “Do you delete comments that are critical of The Telegraph?” read as follows:

No. You’re welcome to criticise our arguments, point out oversights and suggest things that you think we haven’t considered. We know that our readers are very knowledgeable and that is something we value very highly. However, personal abuse is not tolerated.

Thus, while this activity type may be a place where more conflictive and rapport-neglecting and rapport challenging behaviour is to be expected including disagreements and criticisms, newspapers sanction personal attacks, libel and other types of abuses as well as participants who repeatedly attack others unnecessarily. Also, while rapport neglecting and rapport challenging forms of behaviour could be considered normal behaviour in this setting, this circumstance does not automatically imply that the impoliteness is neutralized (cf. Bousfield 2010:105).

Also specific to this activity type are moderation norms that have already been touched upon in the discussion on public discourse norms (i.e. freedom of speech). Moderation policies are in place in all five newspaper community areas investigated in this study. They are meant to protect other commentators and keep a positive spirit on the site but also to legally protect the newspaper. Importantly, all of them engage participants actively in the moderation process by giving them the opportunity to flag inappropriate comments to the moderation team. Depending on the newspaper, pre-publication or post-publication moderation apply. The moderation policies may have an influence on the communicative behaviour of the participants. The *Telegraph Online* standards reflect the need for a balance between free speech and protective measures:

We moderate to help encourage free, open and civil discussion. We try to delete as little as possible though some content has to be removed, usually for legal reasons, sometimes for

taste reasons and always with the aim of keeping the community running smoothly and minimising conflict.

Also *Guardian Online* argues that free speech needs to be limited to a certain extent for the sake of the community spirit:<sup>95</sup>

We understand that people often feel strongly about issues debated on the site, but we will consider removing any content that others might find extremely offensive or threatening.

The *Sun Online* community standards explicitly invite users to report abusive comments:

If you think a user has made a comment somewhere on our site that you think we should know about, click on the 'Report it!' link next to it. Fill in the form, and it'll get passed on to our specially trained staff for attention.

Due to this moderated setting, many participants may not engage in rapport-challenging or threatening behaviour to ensure that their comments are not deleted or that they are completely banned from future participation on the community platform. Nevertheless, as the analysis of my data reveals, this rule does not keep a number of participants from personally attacking others.

Another norm specifically evolved in the context of this activity type is related to the number of allowable comments per participant. *Express Online* community standards want to allow as many participants as possible to share their views. Therefore, they expect their participants to refrain from posting too many comments to individual discussion threads. Not having a chance to take their turn may be experienced as rapport-threatening by co-commentators.

Please do not send multiple comments. So that we can publish comments from as many different people as possible, you should keep the number of contributions you make to each discussion to a reasonable level. Multiple comments from one person, or a small number of people, discourage other people who might wish to take part.

*Mail Online* has a similar policy by keeping the maximum number of contributions to 10 posts per user and discussion threads in 24 hours.

It should be added that the newspapers in this study differ slightly, but not considerably, in regard to their established netiquette rules. Also *Guardian Online*, *Telegraph Online*, *Mail Online* and *Express Online* provide a more detailed

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<sup>95</sup> For a critical debate on moderation policies of *Guardian Online* from the point of view of editors, moderators, users and lawyers cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/oct/25/panel-debate-web-moderation> (accessed Jan. 29, 2011).

description of their netiquette norms than *Sun Online*. This in turn may have an effect on the communicative behaviour of participants. All in all, netiquette and moderation rules prove especially useful for a study of impoliteness in a computer-mediated environment since they allow researchers to look at “codified moral norms” (Haugh 2010:12) of appropriateness against which behaviour may be judged. Especially, a breach with these norms is interesting from an impoliteness perspective. Researchers can thus make use of these rules to illustrate deviations from these norms. Having said that, researchers should not forget that netiquette and moderation rules remain subject to constant re-negotiation (Haugh 2010:12), and norms of appropriateness may thus change over time. Re-negotiations of norms during interaction help researchers to understand how commentators themselves establish impolite behaviour (cf. also section 3.8.4 on meta-pragmatics).

Finally, not only reader response commentators are influenced by situational norms, journalists also need to adhere to norms of professional conduct in their interaction with participants. Especially, since they are publicly known figures, they have to consider how the audience may interpret their behaviour. They thus may not engage in rapport neglecting and challenging behaviour with commentators to save their own reputation and that of the newspaper even if they felt offended. Also, journalists need to adhere to norms of editorial standards that define ethically correct behaviour for news reporters (cf. also Neurauter-Kessels 2011:193). Next to the newspaper’s own standards *The Editor’s Code of Conduct* issued by the Press Complaint Commission (PCC) (cf. PCC 2009, 2011) specifies the proper conduct for members of the British press industry. The PCC contains rules to protect individuals (e. g., privacy protection and non-harassment of persons) but it also provides guidelines for journalists to stay truthful, accurate and objective in their news reporting (cf. also Neurauter-Kessels 2011:193). A breach with these standards may be experienced as rapport-challenging and trigger face threatening behaviour by reader response commentators.

#### *3.8.4. Meta-pragmatic evaluations of impoliteness by participants*

As already discussed in section 3.8.1 on the rationale behind the methodological approach in this study, meta-pragmatic evaluations of impoliteness are an indispensable tool for analysts to enrich any analysis of impoliteness even if such evaluations only occur sparingly in empirical data. For example, in my data set of



1,750 comments, which contains a whole range of offensive and face threatening behaviour, the label *impolite* is not used once to describe another participants' behaviour and the label *rude* is only used once to address an author of an article. Nevertheless, written evaluations of other participants' behaviour provide useful insights into commentators' normative understanding of impolite behaviour.

The following example illustrates a commentator's normative understanding to differentiate between non-offensive banter and impolite behaviour. The commentator talks about the positive community spirit on *Express Online* during the absence of a group of individuals who used to engage in *OFFENSIVE PERSONAL ABUSE* in the reader response section. He or she expresses his/her discontent with their return since they continue with their *ABUSIVE POSTINGS*.

- (3) [...] DURING THAT TIME THERE WAS LIVELKY DEBATE AND SOME BANTER ON THE FORUM, BUT, NO OFFENSIVE PERSONAL ABUSE. THEY RETURNED AND IMMEDIATELY LAUNCHED INTO FRESYH TIRADES OF SCURRILOUS AND ABUSIVE POSTINGS. THAT DEMONSTRATES VERY CLEARLY WHO IS AT FAULT AND WHO IS THE SOLE CAUSE OF THIS PROBLEM

(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009, "Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0017")

Example (4) was produced by the same commentator and also contains explicit negative meta-pragmatic evaluations of two co-commentators' behaviour:

- (4) The libellous comments and obsessive behaviour of these two underhand, and lying individuals have made membership of this forum highly unpleasant. [...] should you cross them you too will find yourselves the victims of their abusive hate campaigns and scurrilous false allegations.

(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009, "Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0002")

Among other accusations, their behaviour is explicitly described as *libellous* and *obsessive*, and the commentator further explains that their offensive behaviour has had a negative effect on his/her membership in the newspaper's community. The commentator also explicitly talks about their abusive behaviour when he/she states that they were involved in *abusive hate campaigns*.

Another example for an explicit meta-pragmatic comment in my data is example (5). Also here the commentator offers an explicit negative evaluation of a group of previous commentators' communicative behaviour:

- (5) [...] Why is it these days that nobody can make a respectful comment on Christianity without attracting a chorus of patronising sneers? What happened to respectful disagreement?

(*Telegraph Online*, September 17, 2009, “The\_Relics\_and\_Bones\_0013”)

Here, other participants have violated the commentator’s normative understanding of “respectful disagreement”. While respectful conduct is closely intertwined with polite behaviour, the commentator’s meta-pragmatic observation indicates that he/she considers the other participants’ behaviour ill-mannered and thus offensive.

As said above, given that such explicit evaluations are rare, Locher & Watts (2008:97) suggest to further look at “affective linguistic reactions”, “accusations of illicit behaviour” as well as counter attacks following an initial insult and bodily/facial expressions. Example (6) illustrates an “affective linguistic reaction” in my data set:

- (6) My god people - is this going to turn into the Spanish Inquisition or something!

(*Mail Online*, September 17, 2009, “Katie\_violently\_attacked\_0046”)

Here the commentator uses the emphatic expression *My god people* to indicate her discontent with previous commentators’ communication behaviour towards the key person featured in the article. Name-calling and swearing, which will be discussed in the analysis sections 4.7 to 4.8.2, can also be considered affective expressions. An example of an accusation of “illicit behaviour” is found on *Telegraph Online*. Here a commentator argues that it is not proper to comment on an issue if the argument is based on false facts.

- (7) Get your facts right before spouting forth such rubbish.

(*Telegraph Online*, September 20, 2009, “The\_gulf\_between\_a\_Princess\_0015”)

The affective expression *before spouting forth such rubbish* reinforces the commentator’s discontent with another commentator’s illicit behaviour. While bodily and facial expression are absent in this form of communication, there are arguably orthographical features that can be interpreted along the same line: For example, the use of multiple questions marks following rhetorical questions in example (8) indicates that the commentator is questioning and challenging the journalist’s credibility.

(8) Am I missing something here???? The "Late" Queen Elizabeth ??? What are you talking about Simon Heffer? [...]

(*Telegraph Online*, September 20, 2009, "The\_gulf\_between\_a\_Princess\_0015")

The same can be said about the multiplication of letters which looks like an imitation of an emphatic outcry at the reappearance of a journalist who had not been publishing articles for quite some time one *Telegraph Online*.

(9) Aaaaaaaarrrrrrghhhhhhhhhh. He's back!

(*Telegraph Online*, September 17, 2009, "The\_Relics\_and\_Bones\_0001")

In conclusion, meta-pragmatic expressions should play a prominent role in any analysis of impoliteness and can be supported by additional features such as those suggested by Locher & Watts (2008) to retrieve signs of a commentator's negative evaluation of another participant's behaviour.

### 3.8.5. *Person-related features: Roles, rights and power*

Spencer-Oatey (2008:33ff.) argues that social and discourse roles as well as power relations and associated rights have a significant impact on interactants' communicative behaviour. While I have already indirectly touched upon roles, rights and power considerations, I want to give a brief view of the dynamics at play in reader responses here (by no means do I claim this to be a comprehensive account): In this form of communication, three active social actors can be identified: the journalists, the moderators and the private commentators. The journalist's main role is to produce news content, whereas the moderator's role is to survey user-generated content for appropriateness. Users act as private contributors of opinions to the ongoing discussions of news items.

Both journalists and moderators act as representatives of the newspaper and therefore need to adhere to the newspaper's defined social standards for their professions. The users need to adhere to the netiquette guidelines defined by the respective newspapers. The tasks and obligations associated with these three social roles already reveal an inequality between newspaper representatives and users. Since the communication takes place on the community platform of the newspaper, it is in the power of the agency to decide on topics of discussion and, more importantly, assign speaking rights. Moderation policies thus crucially define the power relations on the site and put users in an inferior position since their "freedom of speech" is

regulated to a certain extent (see also section 2.4.1). Nevertheless, users also have the option to exercise some form of power over the journalists since they have the liberty to speak their mind under the cover of anonymity. The anonymity thus allows them to share their views more freely while journalists are more limited by the newspapers' editorial policies.

Notwithstanding that newspaper-representatives and users are in an unequal power relation, users among themselves are on an equal footing since everybody has got the same chance to contribute to a news item and is given the same amount of maximum space to have their voice heard. Commentators also all have the same right to report abusive comments or recommend comments that they think are especially valuable. Nevertheless, power relations may shift if certain participants group together to target a single participant. This is for example what "Welsh\_Dragon" claims on *Express Online* about his co-commentators (cf. example (45) in section 4.4.5.3). While everybody has the same right to report comments to the moderators, the person uttering the complaint actually exercises some form of power over their co-participants.

In terms of a detailed description of discursal roles, participants can be divided into producers of talk and receivers of talk respectively. For an in-depth description of the communicative situation and the range of discursal roles in reader responses consult section 4.3.

Finally, offences and thus impoliteness itself can also be used as a strategic tool by participants in their overall argumentative strategy to exercise power over other participants in reader responses (cf. Neurauter-Kessels 2011; for an in-depth discussion on the interplay between power and impoliteness see Locher 2004; and Bousfield & Locher 2008).

### **3.8.6. *Person-related features: Historical relations***

The strength and kind of historical relations among commentators in reader response sections will have an effect on evaluations of impoliteness. Due to the high number of participants in reader response discussions, often, participants do not share a historical relation of interaction. In other words, interactants communicate with each other on a one-off basis. These non-existing relations may affect the behaviour of communicators. In fact, Spencer-Oatey's (e.g. 2008) framework (see also section 3.4) may help to explain ad hoc offensive behaviour towards strangers. The author

(Spencer-Oatey 2008:32) argues that people may hold a rapport-neglect orientation since there are situations where people “have little concern for the quality of the relationship between the other speaker(s) and themselves.” Due to the anonymity among commentators, they thus may not have any motives to maintain or enhance rapport between them since the chance of future contacts are low. In other words, since they are strangers, they may simply not care about the relationship (Spencer-Oatey 2008:33). Actually, already Goffman (1967:7–8) thought along similar lines when he claimed,

an encounter with people whom he will not have dealings with again leaves him free to take a high line that the future will discredit, or free to suffer humiliations that would make future dealings with them an embarrassing thing to have to have.

Nevertheless, a number of interactants may have got to know each other better over time due to shared news interests, and virtual friendships may have developed similar to forum group or chat room communities. If now a person happens to be personally attacked in front of their virtual friends, these face threats may be experienced as more severe since it damages the “public worth” a person has built up with these virtual friends.

However, people may not always share a positive interactional history. In other words, past conflictive encounters among interactants may negatively influence the interpretation of these interactants’ future behaviour. If people are not on “good terms”, they may be more sensitive towards the behaviour of the respective individual and thus be more easily offended. This could be the case on *Express Online*, where we have a set of interactants who repeatedly get into conflictive exchanges (see sections 4.4 to 4.4.6 on conflictive developments). In the following example, commentator “glen1” and “CRESSY” talk about “Welsh\_Dragon”, who is known for his offensive behaviour towards various members of the community. “glen1” suggests to “CRESSY” that she should not get upset about “Welsh\_Dragon” since he/she always demonstrates the same type of negative and “predictable” behaviour:

(10) Is there any point getting sucked in Cressy, no matter if you are diplomatic or defending yourself (which you neednt do). The reaction from dragon is predictable and being carried on from his previous incarnation on here.

(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009, “Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0031”)

In summary, while participants may not always go on record about previous negative encounters with certain individuals, they may react more aggressively towards those interactants they are not on good terms with or experience face threats as more severe from interactants they do not have a positive rapport with. Interactants may have an orientation towards rapport-neglection or rapport-challenge in such cases.

### 3.8.7. *Person-related features: Personality and socio-demographics*

Though it is largely beyond the methodological toolkit of linguists to account for differences in people's personality in relation to language use, a person's character may well play an important role in our understanding of impoliteness and negative online behaviour in general (for a more detailed discussion of this aspect see section 3.10.4). It is hypothesized that a person may be generally more sensitive to a wider range of face aspects than other interactants. Spencer-Oatey (2008:14) argues along similar lines when she claims that face is a conglomerate of individually defined "qualities" that interactants want to claim for themselves and have positively acknowledged by others, but "exactly which attributes are face sensitive can vary from person to person." This aspect demonstrates again the individualistic nature of impolite evaluations. Also, social psychologists have shown that people's level of aggressiveness differs (e.g. Krahé 2001:47 ff.), and thus an interactant with a more aggressive character may engage more easily in face threatening behaviour than others. The commentator "Welsh\_Dragon" on *Express Online* may be an exemplary case. He frequently appears to be in conflict with a number of people across the various discussion threads on the news site (see, for example, section 4.6.14). Next to a person's personality, also the varied socio-demographical background of people in reader response conversations may account for different face sensitivities in a person.

The newspapers analysed in this study attract a largely heterogeneous audience, who meet in the reader response sections to converse. *Guardian Online* calls attention to this point in their netiquette rule: "Think international: It may sound obvious, but bear in mind that when writing for CiF you are writing for an international audience."<sup>96</sup> Naturally, differences in the socio-economic backgrounds of an international audience may produce different face sensitivities and thus trigger

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/mar/04/you-tell-us> (accessed, Sep. 21, 2009).

misunderstandings and perceptions of impoliteness between interactants who do not share similar values and face qualities. Participants from a variety of different geographical locations, nationalities, ethnicities, ages, educational and professional backgrounds, as well as cultural and religious values meet in this online space. While I have already touched upon the idea that different cultural values and norms may lead different interpretations of communicative acts and thus different face considerations, also the other factors may play a role. Spencer-Oatey's framework (e.g. 2008) already accounts successfully for cultural variation and future research will hopefully provide us with more insight as to how the dynamics of socio-demographic factors play into judgements of impoliteness.

### 3.8.8. *Medium-related features: (Pseudo)anonymity and the public, polylogue setting*<sup>97</sup>

Reader responses are produced by (pseudo)anonymous users in a publicly accessible setting. Both factors may influence the communicative behaviour of commentators and have an impact on the realization and interpretation of inappropriate and impolite behaviour (cf. also section 3.10.4 on the discussion of anonymity as a possible motive and cause for conflictive and offensive behaviour online).

Despite the fact that users who want to actively participate in the reader response sections need to register with the respective newspapers, they remain largely anonymous. Often, only basic personal information including a user name and e-mail address are needed for registration.<sup>98</sup> *Mail Online*, does not even require a permanent registration with the newspaper, an ad hoc submission of one's name and location are sufficient. The only information displayed next to each comment and for the public audience to see will be a person's user name and in some cases their geographical location. Additional information such as e-mail addresses are kept by the newspaper for administrative purposes. They are used in case a person needs to be contacted or

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<sup>97</sup> This section draws on Neurauter-Kessels (2011).

<sup>98</sup> The newspapers in this study require participants to submit following personal details:

*Express Online*: Name, user name, e-mail address, location, birth date, sex.

*Guardian Online*: User name, e-mail address, location.

*Mail Online*: Name, location (no prior registration needed, ad hoc submissions possible).

*Sun Online*: Name, user name, e-mail address.

*Telegraph Online*: Name, e-mail address.

an account shut down for improper user behaviour. While users have the option to reveal more about themselves for example on *Guardian* and *Sun Online*, people's offline-identity may remain largely hidden. First of all, users can fake personal details easily, and secondly, a person may be selective in the kind of identity features he/she wants to present to the online community. The (pseudo)anonymous nature of this form of communication has an effect on face considerations. Since one's face is closely interrelated with one's "public worth" (Spencer-Oatey 2005:106), the relative anonymity of the participants affects "the kind of 'face' which is at 'stake'" (Neurauter-Kessels 2011:196). Neurauter-Kessels (2011:195) argues that commentators may have "less face at stake and consequently less face to lose" in this public reader response setting since very little is known about each individual. A person's face may be less vulnerable to other people's negative judgements in this setting than in offline situations where potentially more face dimensions are at play. Since journalists also have a central role in the communication cycle of reader responses, their face at stake also needs to be considered. It is suggested that there is "an asymmetrical distribution between users and journalists in terms of the potential for 'losing one's face' or having one's 'face damaged'" (Neurauter-Kessels 2011:196). Since journalists are the publicly exposed role models of the newspaper, much more personal information is known about them. *Guardian Online*, for example, provides detailed profiles of their reporters including their full name, their position, an employment history or areas of interest and, often, pictures of the respective individual (Neurauter-Kessels 2011:196–197). This circumstance may put journalists at a higher risk of having their face damaged than anonymous users. Also, they may experience face threats as more severe. In other words, "the more that is known about a person, the more damaging face threats can be" (Neurauter-Kessels 2011:196). Having said that, journalists may also utilize the medium's characteristics (physical and temporal distance) to save their own face: "Some journalists may not feel obliged to respond, simply ignoring the face threat or using the excuse of never even having read the offensive comment" (Neurauter-Kessels 2011:196–197).

Next to the medium factor of anonymity, the public mass media context may also affect the realization and interpretation of impoliteness in reader responses. The *Mail Online* explicitly warns commentators about the public nature of the reader response section and possible negative consequences to consider:



This is a public forum.

Once your comment is online, everyone with Internet access can read it. Please make your comment clear to ensure that it is not misunderstood. Your comment may be rated by other users and categorized e.g. best and worst rated. You can express a strong opinion but please do not go over the top. Don't forget that you are legally responsible for what you submit. Please consider how your comment could be received by others. Many different types of people of different ages may view your comment.

The public setting could trigger misunderstandings since people of different cultural backgrounds may interpret communicative acts differently. In other words, different face considerations apply. It also means that targets of face attacks may experience face threats as more severe due to the large-scale public exposure (cf. Neurauter-Kessels 2011) especially if they have previously engaged in private forms of communication (e.g. sharing of personal experiences) with the public.<sup>99</sup> Since participants are always faced with a large anonymous crowd of readers (i.e. actually recipients) who may be present at the speech event (cf. see discussion on outer communication frame in section 4.3), they may experience face threats as a form of “public dressing down” (Bousfield 2008a:40). Günthner (2000:158, 185) also notes that the audience is an essential element for the speech act of teasing. “It is through a person being negatively exposed in front of a listening audience that the communicative force of teasing is reached” (Neurauter-Kessels 2011:198). Spencer-Oatey (2008:36) argues along similar lines when she suggests that “face management” appears to be “number-sensitive”

in that what we say and how we say it is often influenced by the number of people present, and whether they are all listening to what we say. For example, in many cultures, it is much more embarrassing and face-threatening to be criticized in front of one or more other people (for example, in front of a class of students than to be criticized privately, on a one-to-one basis (for example, in the teacher's office, with no one else present).

While the anonymity of contributors may decrease the face damage experienced, the public nature of these online forms of communication can boost the face damage. Again, journalists may experience face threats in front of their readership as more damaging. Especially if face threats attack their authority, creditability or trustworthiness this may hurt their professional reputation (cf. Neurauter-Kessels

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<sup>99</sup> New forms of mass media communication have put into question the core dichotomy of the public and private sphere. Formerly topics that used to be associated with the private sphere are now discussed in front of a mass audience on the web. See Dürscheid (2007) and Landert & Jucker (2011) for their distinction between private and non-private forms of communication in publically accessible situations (see also section 2.4).

2011 for a detailed analysis of face threats that undermine the journalist's professional reputation). That such face threats may also have severe professional consequences for journalists is illustrated by Baron's (2008:107) story of the news reporter Dan Rather. He lost his position at the television station CBS after a group of bloggers posted evidence that one of the journalist's stories was not based on reliable and factually watertight sources. After an internal investigation by the news agency itself Rather offered his apologies for having omitted to check the reliability of his sources and ultimately resigned from his position. One could argue that his public loss of reputation as a credible journalist in front of his audience led to his final death as a news professional. While this may be a single and very extreme case, it does underline that journalists may feel more vulnerable these days to an audience that talks back. Therefore, they may also experience face threats as more damaging.

Part of the public setup is also the polylogue structure that allows multiple commentators to communicate with each other (see also section 4.3 for the communicative situation in reader responses). This structure also affects the face dynamics at play. As is illustrated in sections 4.4.4.2 to 4.4.4.4, reader responses contain numerous examples in which commentators who are not personally attacked feel the need to defend the face of another participant by counter attacking the original offender. In other words, the polylogue structure allows participants not only to defend their own face but also the face of other participants. This also means that due to the presence of a high number of co-participants it may increase the chance that somebody feels also offended by face threats that were not targeted at them. The participants' counter attacks to defend another participant's face are a good illustration of the complexity of whose face can be at stake in a polylogue conversation structure. It also illustrates that speaker intention is only part of the equation to understand how face can be threatened and judgments of impoliteness be made (see section 3.5 on intention).

In line with Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010a) and Terkourafi (2008) it can also be argued that such counter attacks have two face dimensions: On the one hand they are meant to issue a face attack at the original offender, but at the same time they help the original victim to have their face maintained or enhanced and thus reinforce the rapport between two commentators: "[F]ace-maintaining/enhancing behaviour towards some participants, in the case of polylogues, can result from face-attack

toward other participants involved, as part of coalition building practices” (cited in Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Lorenzo-Dus, & Bou-Franch 2010:694).

In summary, the relative anonymity of participants and the public polylogue nature of reader responses may affect the interpretation of impoliteness. It is argued that this form of communication allows for a limited set of face dimensions to be present and thus decreases commentators’ vulnerability of having one’s “public worth” damaged. On the other hand, the presence of a large audience may boost face damages. That may especially be the case if commentators have developed friendships with other commentators (cf. section 3.8.6 on historical relations). Here a public loss of face in front of one’s virtual friends may be experienced as more severe. Finally, the polylogue structure also has an effect on whose face is at stake and who, other than the original victim, feels the need to respond to a face attack.

### **3.9. Universal (im)politeness and inherent (im)politeness: Concepts of the past?**

Politeness itself can never be conclusively defined with respect to specific linguistic devices, nor can it be universally predicted in a theoretical way. (Locher 2006a:264)

Since the seminal work of Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987), the universal as well as the inherent nature of (im)politeness have been debated. The concepts have been touched upon in previous sections (e.g. section 3.8.1), but I want to present a detailed view of these two aspects here and conclude with a reflection on my own approach in this study.

While Brown & Levinson’s ([1978]1987) model was criticized for its lack of universality (i.e. ethnocentric setup) despite their universal objective, most recently researchers have argued that the aspiration for universality in (im)politeness research needs to be relativized. Mills (2011:28) argues that it is a trend in post-modern research to refrain from “all attempts at grand narrative or metanarrative, that is, all overarching theories which attempt to generalise or universalise.” Mills (2011:26) concludes that while (im)politeness can be considered a universal concept, it loses its universal nature once put in to real-life application: “[A]lthough it is possible to talk about politeness and impoliteness in a universalistic way, we must recognise that within different cultures, these terms have different meanings and functions.”

More than a decade earlier, Spencer-Oatey (2000:12) took a similar standpoint in her discussion of the concept of face: “I believe face to be a universal phenomenon:

everyone has the same fundamental face concerns. However, culture can affect the relative sensitivity of aspects of people's face, as well as which strategies are most appropriate for managing face."

Central to the idea that (im)politeness needs to be studied at the "local level" (Locher 2006a:253) is the assumption that (im)politeness is not inherent in specific linguistic devices. In other words, since language features are not inherently (im)polite, judgements of (im)politeness only exist in a local context, and thus no universal claims can be made (cf. also Mills 2011:26). Allan & Burridge (2006:29) illustrate the concept's state of flux as follows:

What counts as courteous behaviour varies between human groups; and, because the smallest group consists of just two people, the variation is boundless. Consequently, the way Ed and Jo address one another may strike them as polite but Sally as impolite. The manners regarded as polite in previous centuries sometimes seem ridiculous pedantic today and, if practiced in the twenty-first century, would be inappropriate.

That this is not a new thought is illustrated with a statement of Murray (1824:174) from 1824: "Every polite tongue has its own rules." In fact, scholars these days seem to have left the idea of inherent (im)politeness behind them. For example, Kienpointner (1997:255) claims, "sentences are not ipso facto rude; it is speakers who are rude." Mills (2005:265) agrees, "I believe that impoliteness has to be seen as an assessment of someone's behaviour rather than a quality intrinsic to an utterance." Locher & Watts' (2008:78) maxim is the same: "There is [...] no linguistic behaviour that is inherently polite or impolite." Haugh (2010:7) also talks about the "inherent discursivity of evaluations of impoliteness" (cf. also Culpeper 1996:350–351, 2005:41, 2008:20; Locher & Watts 2005:29) and repeatedly states that "impoliteness is not inherent in particular linguistic and nonlinguistic signals."

Despite the leading opinion in the field that (im)politeness cannot be pinned down to linguistic means, a number of researchers have not completely rejected the idea. Interestingly, Culpeper (2011:17) is also among the scholars who argue that "[r]ather than rejecting this notion out of hand, [...] there is a sense in which impoliteness can be inherent." Culpeper thinks here of a pool "conventionalized" linguistic means that users choose from in ever-day conversations and which arguably have a tendency of being "conventionally" understood as (im)polite in many different contexts. Bousfield (2008a:54) explains the idea as follows:

[...] some lexico-syntactic forms are conventionally held to be im/polite across multiple, regularly occurring, well known (to the interactants) discourses and discourse contexts and, as such, their enactment produces the pragmatic effect(s) that the participants conventionally believe or understand it to hold.

As already mentioned, Terkourafi (2011:162) also assumes a certain stability for interpretations of (im)politeness due to shared pre-established norms in a given CofP. Terkourafi (2008:66) argues that people use such conventionalized expressions since they are more economical to reach a certain perlocutionary effect. Naturally, such a view rests on the assumption that both interactants share a similar habitus (cf. also Bourdieu 1990) to communicate successfully by means of conventionalized linguistic forms. Culpeper (2005:41) gives the example of *you fucking cunt*. He argues that conventionally and across most discourse contexts this may produce the pragmatic effect of being understood as impolite by participants. Nevertheless, the question remains whether we can talk about inherent impolite linguistic means here. The very same phrase may lose its negative pragmatic force in a friendly banter among close friends (Leech 1983). For example, two teenage friends may find it very entertaining to use such an address to greet each other: *Hey you fucking cunt, how are you doing today?* Also, its inflationary use may reduce its linguistically destructive strength.

Notwithstanding, Culpeper (2011, sections 4.3 and 4.4) believes that there are a number of conventionalized linguistic forms, so-called "impoliteness formulae". Such a view is in stark contrast with the strictly discursive way of thinking about (im)politeness (cf. Locher & Watts 2008). One of Culpeper's (2011:123) arguments, difficult to refute, is the proposition that it's hard to imagine how communication can be successful "without shared conventions of meaning". Also, he suggests that it is striking that people within a community share similar views on the politeness or impoliteness of certain expressions. Culpeper (2011:124) concludes: "They must have some kind of semantic knowledge; or, to put it another way, the pragmatics of these expressions must be semantically encoded in some way." As a consequence, Culpeper (2011:127) imagines the creation of impolite formulae in a community as follows:

The process by which expressions become semantically imbued with politeness or impoliteness contexts assumes that some expressions have a more stable relationship with (im)politeness contexts and effects than others, and that over time those expressions begin to acquire conventional associations of the (im)politeness contexts in which they are regularly used – they become conventionalized.

To come up with a list of linguistic means that are conventionally interpreted as impolite Culpeper (2011:134) used an extensive set of empirical data (cf. Culpeper 2011:8–9 for a detailed data description). In this set he analysed expressions “to which somebody, typically the target, displayed evidence that they took the utterance as impolite”. Once these were identified he double-checked the entries with the Oxford English Corpus (OEC) for overlaps with “impoliteness events”. As a result, the following linguistic expressions should be considered conventionalized impoliteness formulae according to Culpeper (2011:135, his examples, not all elements are obligatory):<sup>100</sup>

1. Personalized negative vocatives: *You fucking dickhead.*
2. Personalized negative assertions: *You are shit.*
3. Personalized negative references: *Your stinking body.*
4. Personalized third-person negative references (in the hearing of the target):  
*She’s nutzo.*
5. Pointed criticisms/complaints: *This is rubbish.*
6. Unpalatable questions and/or presuppositions: *Which lie are you telling me?*
7. Condescension: *That’s being babyish.*
8. Message enforcers: *Do you understand me?*
9. Dismissals: *Go away.*
10. Silencers: *Shut the fuck up.*
11. Threats: *You’d better be ready Friday the 20<sup>th</sup> to meet with me.*
12. Negative expressions (e.g. curses, ill-wishes): *Go to hell.*

Culpeper (2011:136; 139) underlines that taboo words often are used in connection with one of the formulae above and could be seen as intensifiers to “[help] secure an impoliteness uptake.” He admits that this must be seen as an incomplete list of formulae influenced by the type of data that he consulted, but he considers these a fairly good list of expressions that are representative of the category impoliteness formulae. Also, Culpeper (2011:136) adds that para-verbal means could obviously also be counted towards these conventionalized forms (e.g. spitting, turning one’s back on someone, “giving somebody the finger”). The author (Culpeper 2011:137) concludes that these formulae vary along three factors: Some may be more

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<sup>100</sup> For more examples consult Culpeper (2011:135–136).

conventional than others, some may be interpreted as impolite in more contexts than others, and finally, they may differ in terms of “gravity of offence”.

While Culpeper convincingly argues that conventionalized forms have a tendency to be interpreted as impolite in a number of contexts, I think we should still refrain from using the term “inherent” as it suggests something intrinsically present and stable at all times. And that this is not the case Culpeper (2011:129) is aware as well, when he argues that even the (im)politeness formulae may not always create the conventionalized pragmatic effect:

[I]t should be stressed that a conventionalised (im)polite expression does not guarantee an interpretation of (im)politeness (it can be cancelled by a contextual feature), and (im)politeness can be achieved in other ways apart from using such expressions.

In summary, Culpeper offers a convincing account of impoliteness formulae that is very useful for the present study. While I also do not work under the presumption that there is something like inherently impolite communicative acts that one could go out and discover in a given data set, I believe that the linguistic phenomena (i.e. personal attacks) identified in my study show features of Culpeper’s formulae. Personal attacks include elements of negative assertions, negative references next to criticisms, condescending remarks as well as dismissals and threats. Since I am only working with one type of discourse, I do not want to claim that the personal attacks identified in my corpus will always be interpreted as impolite across a number of different contexts. However, I believe that the appearance of the formulae-like linguistic means described above in the types of personal attacks identified in reader responses, combined with the given contextual and situational factors, reinforce the argument that these are likely to be conventionally interpreted as impolite by members of the community. Additionally, the use of what Locher & Watts (2008:95) call “affective linguistic reactions” such as swearing, name-calling and orthographical features in combination with these personal attacks may be used as intensifiers to create the intentional or unintentional pragmatic effect of impoliteness.

### **3.10. Related forms of conflictive and offensive behaviour in CMC**

In this section I am going to discuss whether certain types of negative behaviours commonly associated with CMC and previously discussed in other fields of research may overlap with the study of impoliteness in online settings. I will show that especially flaming and trolling are conceptually interesting.

### 3.10.1. *Flaming*

Flaming is a phenomenon commonly associated with CMC and generally refers to emotionally charged and verbally offensive behaviour. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, in the early days of CMC research, academics started to pay attention to this form of negative online behaviour. The intense interest was also partly based on a fear that the Internet could trigger language decay and a decline in civility. Back then, many researchers speculated about a strong link between the observed negative online behaviour and the technological setup of computer-mediated forms of communication. Scholars (e.g. Sproull & Kiesler 1986) frequently theorized that reduced social context cues could cause users to behave negatively online. In the 1990s, for example, Shea (1994:43) argued that flaming had a “longstanding network tradition” and Tannen (1998:239) hypothesized that flaming was a form of “technology enhanced aggression”. According to Tannen (1998:239), especially the communication of anonymous and physically distant participants in CMC triggered flaming behaviour, defined in her words as “vituperative messages that verbally attack”. Tannen (1998:239) argues as follows:

Flaming results from the anonymity not only of the sender but also of the receiver. It is easier to feel and express hostility against someone far removed whom you do not know personally, like the rage that some drivers feel toward an anonymous car that cuts them off. If the anonymous driver to whom you’ve flipped the finger turns out to be someone you know, the rush of shame you experience is evidence that anonymity was essential for your expression- and experience-of-rage.

In an early netiquette guide by Storrer & Waldenberger (1998:70) they warned users to refrain from ironic messages without the additional use of contextualizing emoticons to avoid misunderstandings and consecutively also to prevent flaming attacks by others. In her netiquette guide, Shea (1994:58) suggested to users who were not able resist from flaming to flag such messages with “FLAME ON” and “FLAME OFF” (cf. also Storrer & Waldenberger 1998:74). Shea (1994:58) advised to proceed as follows: “So before you begin your rant, simply enter the words FLAME ON. Then rant away. When you’re done, write FLAME OFF and resume normal discourse.” In Shea’s view, such labels would allow users to speak their mind. At the same time, such labels would help others to understand that these are now exceptional circumstances where somebody just wants to vent their emotions and that this person does not usually talk in such a manner to other people. Of course, the communication possibilities online have advanced drastically since Shea’s publication in 1994.



Nevertheless, this method appears to still find at least some application in Google Groups<sup>101</sup> as example (11)<sup>102</sup> from a discussion group of Motorola owners illustrates. The user “plummerr” shares her/his discontent over the group’s forum manager, who had previously accused her/him of trying to do something illegal with a Motorola hot spot device. At the same time, the forum manager had also alerted the user that discussions involving illegal actions are not allowed according to the group’s “site rules”. The user “plummerr” flags the counter attack as flame by means of <flame on> and <flame off>:

(11) <flame on> BTW - I didn't appreciate the trailing snub (re: following site rules), which assumed that I was up to something nefarious. If you are a Motorola or Verizon representative you should know better or else you're in need of a bit of customer sensitivity training. I'm spend my hard earned money on your products, which appear to link to complex voice and data plans. The last thing I need is for some additional distractions from someone shooting from the lip or finger before engaging their brain - and yes, that pissed me off. <flame off>

First, “plummerr” accuses the forum manager of snubbing her/him. Then the user vents her/his anger at what she/he considers to be a disrespectful treatment by the Motorola employee especially after spending a lot of money on the company’s products. She/he insinuates that the forum manager lacks service skills as well as the mental capabilities to engage with customers on an appropriate level and concludes that such behaviour *pisses* [her/him] *off*. It appears, that the user indeed wants to demonstrate that she/he is aware that the comment may not be appropriate by the site’s communication standards and that other users and the target addressee should read it in consideration of the circumstances. Additionally, it could be argued in this example that such labels also serve as attention-catcher. This method thus may increase the chances that “plummerr’s” message stands out from all the other messages that the forum manager has to deal with on a daily basis, and it may increase the likelihood of being read by the forum manager.

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<sup>101</sup> A basic search in all 3,614,570 English-language Google Groups (cf. <http://groups.google.com>) for “FLAME ON” and “FLAME OFF” resulted in a total number of hits of 19,600 occurrences (status 21 July, 2011). Admittedly, such a basic search surely includes irrelevant material and meta-discussions on these labels, but a spot check revealed that this method is still used actively to some extent in these discussion groups.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. <https://supportforums.motorola.com/thread/6963> (accessed July 21, 2011).

Whereas USENET groups continue to use flame labels, this method has certainly not survived (or may indeed have never been used) in the reader responses here studied. Researchers also continue to blame the anonymity of the web for flaming behaviour (e.g. Lakoff 2005:32; Herring 2007). They do so despite the fact that more recent research shows that flaming behaviour online cannot be sufficiently explained with a technologically deterministic view (Kruger et al. 2005:934; O'Sullivan & Flanagan 2003:76). For a more detailed discussion on possible reasons and motives for flaming behaviour see section 3.10.4. In summary, the study of flaming has a long research tradition in the social sciences rather than in the linguistic field. Nevertheless, it appears to provide us with valuable insights for the study of impolite and conflictive reader responses.

Before discussing promising connections between flaming and impoliteness online, two further concepts need to be mentioned here, namely the concept of flame baits and the phenomenon of flame wars. Flame baits is a term commonly used in the online context and can be defined as messages that are meant to stir a flame response or another foreseeable reaction by an interactant (Herring et al. 2002:375). In other words, flame baits are produced by a person who intentionally sets out to trigger an antisocial interaction among users for their personal entertainment. The continuation of flame message exchanges among users – be they intentionally triggered or accidental in their origin – can evolve into a so-called flame war. Flame wars can basically start on any topic ranging from political or religious issues to the most trivial matters. Shea (1994:73) cites an example of a flame war on the USENET news group rec.food.veg. Participants there started a hostile debate about who would run a higher risk of developing a lack of the vitamin B 12 based on their daily intake of food: people with a vegan or an omnivore diet. Flame wars may not even be topic-related but can also be triggered by discrepancies in regard to community norms and netiquette. In other words, heated debates may evolve around what is to be considered appropriate behaviour in a discussion. Such “wars” do not necessarily need to be fought by a large group but can also evolve between two individuals. Lee (2005:388–389), who investigated a number of social, political and technology USENET news groups, describes a flame war between two users who started to attack each other after disagreeing on the most suitable style to quote other participants' postings. While one was of the opinion that it is desirable to edit/shorten quotes to the most essential information, the other user did not see why one should have to spend time on doing

so. It was the following initial flame bait by an upset long-term user which triggered the flame war:

(12) Folks, edit your quotes!!!! What is it with folks who post 2 lines to a 56-line quote ...

Two posts further on, the other user is clearly upset with the initiator of the dispute and responds with following message:

(13) If USENET is failing, it's NOT because people like me refuse to let self-appointed Net-Nazi's like you, pretend that their personal tastes are the Gospel according to userid.

Lee states that this specific flame war continued with more personal attacks full of name-calling, insults and swearing. It is, however, unclear from Lee's study how the "war" ended. To conclude, flame wars can theoretically evolve in any form of computer-mediated form of communication. They may result in a settlement of the dispute, but in most cases, as Lee (2005:400) concludes, they may simply evaporate once participants lose interest in the exchange of hostilities. This may have been the case in the example cited above.

In the following, I will show that there are different views as to what actually constitutes a flame. As we will see at the end of this section, it is vital for anybody studying impoliteness in CMC to have a proper understanding of flaming since both phenomena are partly described by means of the same terminology and shared conceptual links. Baron (2008:28), for example, describes flaming as "using rude – even crude – language". Graham (2008:304) portrays flame messages in terms of face, a concept which is also at the heart of most theories on impoliteness, and concludes that they are "often viewed as extremely face-threatening." Turnage (2007:44) provides a collection of the most frequently mentioned features in past academic discussions to describe the core elements of flaming and comes to the following conclusion: Flaming is characterised by "hostility, aggression, intimidation, insults, offensiveness, unfriendly tone" and "uninhibited behaviour". This is in line with O'Sullivan & Flanagin's (2003:71) comprehensive collection of past research on the concept of flaming. I would like to summarize their overview by means of three basic criteria which become apparent when looking at their compilation. According to the bulk of research flaming has been defined as one of the following types of behaviour:

- 1) Inappropriate social behaviour (“antisocial interaction”, “nonconforming behaviour”, “a form of social aggression”)<sup>103</sup>
- 2) Inappropriate verbal behaviour (“insult”, “hostile verbal behaviour”, “verbal aggression”, “blunt disclosure”)<sup>104</sup>
- 3) Inappropriate emotional behaviour (“emotional outbursts”) (“the hostile expression of strong emotions and feelings”).<sup>105</sup>

So, while the stress is either on the social, the verbal or the emotional aspect of flaming, such terminology can also be quite easily situated in the conceptual space of impoliteness. Moreover, the descriptions are so general that they tend to overlap. For example “verbal aggression” may be defined as a type of “antisocial interaction” that is emotionally charged. An “insult”, a specific type of “verbal aggression”, may be the result of an “emotional outburst”. All of them could be summarized as “nonconforming behaviour”. What is common to most of the past academic research is the assumption that the kind of displayed hostility, aggressiveness and so forth is not just unique to the online space but also only first made possible by the computer-mediated environment. Kiesler et al. (1984:1130) phrases it as follows: “Flaming refers to the practice of expressing oneself more strongly on the computer than one would in other communication settings.” However, whether flaming is really just restricted to CMC is questionable. While most researchers have associated flaming with an online context, Döring (2003:156) argues it is still not clear in how far such negative behaviour online can be qualitatively and quantitatively differentiated from face-to-face offences as found in exploitive talk-shows and parliamentary debates. Interestingly, when we call to mind Tannen’s argument for flaming as a CMC phenomenon at the beginning of this section, she actually equates anonymous flaming online with anonymous offline behaviour (aggressive car driving). So, while we can hypothesize that the anonymity may play a role for aggressive behaviour online, we should be careful to conclude that such behaviour is by default qualitatively different from anonymous offline behaviour.

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<sup>103</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Colomb & Simutis (1996); Korenman & Wyatt (1996); and Thompson (1996).

<sup>104</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Herring (1996a), Korenman & Wyatt (1996); Parks & Floyd (1996); and Thompson & Foulger (1996)

<sup>105</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Lea et al. (1992); and Korenman & Wyatt (1996).

While researchers have thus provided various descriptions of flames and/or flaming (Alonzo & Aiken 2004:205; O’Sullivan & Flanagin 2003:72–74), the following linguistic features have also been found to be characteristic of these aggressive and hostile interactions, namely, the usage of “profanity, insults, and other offensive or hurtful statements” (Johnson, Cooper, & Chin 2008:419). Next to these features, Spertus (1997), who designed software to automatically identify flames in e-mail messages, also included epithets as an independent category. Mabry (1997), on the other hand, defines flames as any form of ad hominem attack and Turnage (2007:44) adds that many researchers consider sarcasm as an instance of flaming. Next to descriptions of social behavioural elements and specific language strategies also orthographical emphasis including “all capital letters, or numerous punctuation marks” (Turnage 2007:44) are suggested by some research as characteristic of flames. Already early netiquette guides recommended to refrain from capitalization since it could be understood as SHOUTING by other participants (cf. Storrer & Waldenberger 1998:71). The orthographic dimension shows clearly that researchers thought of flaming as a phenomenon not just limited to the online space but more specifically typical of written forms of CMC. Papacharissi (2004:260; 269) adds a final dimension to the list by suggesting that flames are often disjoint and senseless exchanges that may disrupt an online community’s cohesiveness.

A challenge in the conceptualisation of flaming is the fact that even if researchers are not so far apart in their theoretical idea of the phenomenon, once the concept of flaming is applied to an empirical investigation, it is clear that researchers operationalize flaming in a number of ways by means of different linguistic features. As a result, past research illustrates that it often also depended on the individual judgment of researchers (who in the past were more often sociologists rather than linguists) as to what they actually consider linguistic realisations of, for example, “offensive language” or “uninhibited behaviour” (O’Sullivan & Flanagin 2003:73). Admittedly, this does not matter so much as long as the research is judged in its own right but becomes problematic when talks start about the frequency and prominence of the phenomenon in various forms of CMC. For example, Manosevitch & Walker (2009) claim that previous studies demonstrate that USENET groups show a high level of flaming. Depending on the features included in different studies a very different picture may arise. O’Sullivan & Flanagin (2003:72–73) give a

comprehensive overview of the various parameters that were used in some of the most often cited empirical research to code data for instances of flaming (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Analysis categories in early studies on flaming

Flame features	Kiesler et al. (1984)	Kiesler et al. (1985)	Dubrovsky et al. (1991)	Lea & Spears (1992)	McCormick (1992)	Weisband (1992)	Seigel et al. (1996)	Kayany (1998)
Swearing	yes	yes	yes	yes	-	yes	yes	yes
Insults	yes	-	-	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Name calling	yes	-	yes	yes	-	yes	yes	yes
Threats	-	-	yes	-	yes	-	-	-
Impolite comments	-	yes	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hostile comments	yes	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Perception of disinhibition	-	-	-	yes	-	-	-	-
Ridiculing	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	yes

While some of these categories are more straightforward and applied almost consistently across the various studies (e.g. swearing, insults and name-calling), hostile or impolite comments are wide-ranging categories that can include all kinds of subcategories. Name-calling and insults can actually be considered to have the perlocutionary effect of being evaluated by receivers of the messages as offensive, hostile and impolite at the same time. It remains vague in the study by Kiesler et al. (1985) what kind of impolite comments were coded. Ridiculing was only explicitly mentioned in Kayany's (1998) study. Likewise, threats appear to have been only of relevance in two out of eight studies. Thus, researchers did not appear to treat threats as a core feature of flaming. Lastly, the category "perception of disinhibition", which focuses on the receiver's perception of what they consider flaming behaviour, was only investigated in the study by Lea & Spear (1992). Based on Table 5 it is also obvious that the categories above are only a prototypical sub-selection of what could be subsumed under "hostile and aggressive" behaviour. Spertus (1997) also concluded that her software, which was programmed to detect instances of flaming, was flawed. She had to realize that what she had deemed to be the most logical method at the start of the project, namely to scan texts for "obscene expressions", did not give her the desired results.

Recent studies on flaming are few. An exception is Turnage, who tested participants' perception of flaming in a corpus of 20 e-mail messages based on a semantic differential scale. Based on her results, Turnage (2007:50) concludes that following six features correlate statistically and are thus characteristic of flaming: "hostility, aggression, intimidation, level of insult, offensiveness and unfriendliness." While such an approach is a good starting point to understand the layperson's evaluation of flaming behaviour, it is not sufficient as a methodological tool to help researchers successfully categorize linguistic phenomena as flaming. For example,

Turnage (2007:52) concluded that despite the fact that some messages included profanity, participants did not rate them as flames. In this respect O'Sullivan & Flanagan's (2003) point of view is important. They are one of the first to consider a dimension which was ignored and/or at least not explicitly discussed in most of the previous empirical studies on flaming. They (2003:71, 72) rightly point out that such linguistic variables cannot be evaluated independently of their context of use and that only a contextually enriched interpretation helps us to understand flaming in its full complexity: "[P]erspectives on flaming suffer from imprecision in conceptual and operational definitions that stem from an overemphasis on message content versus message context." They stress the point that cultural and situational norms as well as speaker intentionality are key in identifying and interpreting flames successfully. Such a view is flexible enough to evaluate cases of profanity as either real instances of flaming or e.g. as some form of in-group marker among close friends. To solve this problem, their framework takes into account speaker and receiver interpretation as well as third party interpretation. With the last-mentioned feature they include another innovative variable in their methodological thinking. As Table 5 illustrates, in most studies interactions were not evaluated by participants themselves but by a third party i.e. the researcher. O'Sullivan & Flanagan are thus aware that an outside observer may experience an interaction differently from the involved participants (i.e. the layperson's perspective versus a researcher's objectified abstraction of these linguistic phenomena). McKee (2002:432) is also of the opinion that flaming can only be captured successfully in its situational context:

[F]laming can best be understood by examining it in relation to wider cultural and social contexts, including the forum in which it occurs, the individuals who send and receive it, and the discourse communities to which those individuals belong.

Danet (forthcoming) is actually one of the first researchers to use such a constructivist pragmatic approach in her empirical study of flaming in a set of English-language listserv conversations among Israeli. In her study, linguistic realisations of flaming are evaluated against the backdrop of situational factors including the technological and organisational setup of the listserv as well as user characteristics such as gender and personality traits. Moreover, Danet considers the wider socio-cultural context in which these conversations took place.

Remarkably, O'Sullivan & Flanagan (2003), McKee (2002), Danet's (forthcoming) approaches are very similar to the scholarly discussions one would also

find in the field of impoliteness studies. Speaker intention and hearer perception in combination with situational and context factors are nowadays crucial methodological tools in impoliteness research as has been illustrated in the previous sections. Even more striking is the fact that the terminology and the linguistic categories used to describe flaming in previous research largely overlap with the terminology that scholars draw on to depict and conceptualize impolite behaviour. For example, Herring (1994:279) and Lakoff (2005:32) view flaming as linguistic forms which violate norms of politeness. Baron (2008:28) declares that flaming is “rude-even crude-language”. Döring (2003:155) and Frohwein et al. (2005:14) equate flaming with offences. Jucker & Taavitsainen (2000:90) describe flaming as a “form of insult”. Additionally, both flaming and impoliteness have been associated with “verbal aggression” (Archer 2008:198; Parks & Floyd 1996:81).

Swearing, name-calling, profanities and ad hominem attacks, so-called typical linguistic features of flaming, are also very suitable categories for an exploration of impoliteness. What stands out in all these definitions of flaming is the shared presupposition that this negative behaviour is purely thought of as an online phenomenon. Yet, based on the descriptions above, I argue that flaming behaviour is not necessarily different from what researchers would evaluate as impolite behaviour in a different setting (e.g. face-to-face). As it stands, it is primarily the online context and maybe the quantity of the verbal behaviour which seems to be a differentiator here rather than a qualitative difference in the two phenomena per se. Interestingly, Danet (forthcoming), who, as mentioned, is one of the first to explicitly link flaming with impoliteness studies (cf. also Graham 2007, 2008), does not draw a clear line between the two concepts in her analysis of listserv discussions. In her study, she uses the terms interchangeably to refer to the same linguistic phenomena in her data. A similar approach is also supported by Haugh (2010:8), who suggests that flaming appears to have such a close relation to the field of impoliteness that they should be studied together:

Yet while the notion of flaming has largely developed in the specific contexts of email and online discussion boards, it bears remarkable similarity to the notion of impoliteness in that both involve evaluations of behaviour as hostile and offensive. It appears, then, that research into relational or interpersonal aspects of CMC in various modes and contexts might benefit from recent work where impoliteness has been theorized in its own right.



As flaming has thus been described as inappropriate social, verbal and emotional behaviour it could also be subsumed under Culpeper's (2011:98, my emphasis) most recent definition of impoliteness:

Impoliteness is a *negative attitude* towards *specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts*. It is sustained by expectations, desires and /or beliefs about *social organisation*, including, in particular, how one person's or a group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviours are *viewed negatively* – considered 'impolite' – when they conflict with *how one expects them to be*, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they *ought to be*. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have *emotional consequences* for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to *cause offence*. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly *intentional or not*.

Just like impoliteness, flaming embodies a “negative attitude towards specific behaviours” triggered by the surrounding circumstances or acts of interlocutors. Both concepts are used to evaluate this behaviour as negative, and this assessment is related to situational and contextual norms of appropriateness and expectations about these norms (e.g. the netiquette rules of listserv or online news media sites). Just like impolite behaviour, flaming has “emotional consequences” for targets of flames. Depending on the context, participants may experience a flame, just like an impolite utterance, as more offensive if the flamer or the person that utters the impoliteness is thought to offend another participant on purpose. Based on Culpeper's definition of impoliteness, I would like to propose that flaming, both intentional and unintentional types, cannot be conceptually differentiated from impoliteness at this stage. In this study it is assumed that just like in the case of flaming, impoliteness can also be both, intentional or unintentional. In other words incidental or accidental forms of impoliteness are also possible (cf. Bousfield 2008a:68–69; 70–71). Therefore, I would like to suggest that on a qualitative level, flaming should be viewed as a specific online form of impoliteness and thus a sub-category of the spectrum of all impolite behaviour. Prototypical of this form of negatively evaluated behaviour are name-calling, epithets, swear words and insults but this list should not be understood as exhaustive. Recipients of these flames may interpret other linguistic forms just as well as instance of flaming depending on the situational or negotiated norms and expectations about these norms. In any case, these flames are considered face threatening and in turn can be evaluated as impolite. This conceptualisation of flaming also includes instances of flaming that are just for the personal amusement of

a user. In other words, independent of the intentions of a flamer, a recipient may still experience these utterances as offensive and thus impolite.

Notwithstanding, depending on the situational and contextual parameters (e.g. due to anonymity, physical distance, editorial control, power, speaking rights) one may expect different frequency levels for the type of offences and the linguistic patterns in online and offline settings across different communication modes. However, such differences remain to be tested in a systematic comparison and are merely quantitative and a matter of degree rather than qualitative. For example, one may discover that indeed the frequency and type of name-calling used in forms of CMC show different patterns from various forms of face-to-face communication. Let's hypothesize that calling somebody a (*Net-*)*Nazi* as illustrated in example (13) following a rather trivial conflict occurs more quickly in a public anonymous online setting (e.g. in a USENET group) because users may feel safe under the cover of their pseudo-anonymity. Arguably, after uttering such a highly defamatory and offensive remark, a person may face less severe consequences (i.e. sanctions) in an online forum than in a public face-to-face conversation (e.g. on a TV show) where the identity of an interlocutor is in most cases known or at least the person is physically present<sup>106</sup>. Online, extremely offensive language use may simply lead to the closing of a user's account. In a face-to-face encounter the person could, in the worst case, be even held responsible before court for this kind of defamatory name-calling. For example, Cucoreanu (2008:121) cites the case of the politician Andreas Wabl, who was legally convicted in 2000 for claiming in a press conference that the Austrian newspaper *Kronen Zeitung* practiced "Nazi-journalism". Nevertheless, where researchers would call an utterance like *self-appointed Net-Nazi's like you* an instance of flaming in a CMC context, I argue, that one could evaluate the same linguistic realisation as gravely impolite in an offline

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<sup>106</sup> Notwithstanding, the legislations of various countries are in the process of adjusting and establishing new laws to also allow for the prosecution of online offenders. Cucoreanu (2008) evaluates the challenges and possible solutions in regulating the freedom of expression online from a jurisdictional perspective. For example, next to questions of the traceability of offenders, an important issue is which jurisdiction is responsible for an offence given the global nature of CMC. First cases of success are related to offences on Facebook where the identification of offenders is often easier. For example, in Switzerland in 2010, a teenager was convicted to pay a fine for calling another man "Seckel" [= 'person with a bad character'; in English 'Sod'] on Facebook (NZZ 2010). In a more severe case, two British adolescents were sentenced to four years in prison after posting messages on Facebook to encourage people to riot in their home towns (Whitehead & Bunyan 2011).

setting. Continuing this line of thought, I conclude that while all instances of flaming can be considered impolite not all forms of impoliteness are instances of flaming. That being said, we can clearly exclude one sub-type of flaming from the concept of destructive impoliteness, namely, the ludic form of flaming.

CMC participants engage in hurtful flaming often just for their own personal amusement. While this type may be still covered under the topic of impoliteness online, we need to differentiate this type from the overtly artful form of flaming. I would like to term this type “stage flaming”. “Stage flaming” is also meant for personal entertainment but here all interactants, including most importantly, the recipients of flames are fully aware of the playful and ludic nature of the communication (cf. also Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000:90–92). Given this circumstance, “stage flaming” does not fall into the category of destructive impoliteness. This ludic form is practiced in so-called flame fora such as <http://flamewarforums.net> or <http://theflamewarforum.friendhood.net>, <http://www.flamewarriors.net> and de.alt.flame in Google Group. The main aim of these fora is the exchange of verbal abuses for the amusement of all group members.<sup>107</sup> The focus here is on the verbose creativity, and flames are not meant to intentionally hurt an interlocutor. The introductory words of the web forum master on <http://flamewarforums.net/> welcomes new members as follows:

Ever find a douchebag who honestly just needs a good embarrassment but the forum he is on doesn't allow it? And IM's are too private for true pain? Ever need to just rant? Feel the need to find a place to debate with intellectual human beings? This is the forum for you. We're looking for great thinking, rational, intelligent members who are also good at debating. High level flammers, if you must. This forum is home of the best trolls and flammers who strive to piss the most people off. Come here to flame that person you couldn't on a different forum for the world to see. Or to get your ass beat.

This quotation reveals that the forum manager is of the opinion that for this “art” of flaming to be successful, an audience needs to be present to actually observe the flaming “duels”. In her/his view, instant messaging (IM) is “too private for true pain” and flaming needs a public forum so the “world [can] see” how a person has their “ass beat”. Flame tirades can also be aimed at non-forum members who one would like to

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<sup>107</sup> Interestingly though, the flame fora are not always consistently used for the purpose of flaming. A spot check revealed that people also have rational debates from time to time. For example, the user “lololöchle” (Dec. 10, 2009) complains that his co-commentators do not use de.alt.flame according to its purpose: “Ist diese Gruppe immer so lahm? Warum tut hier keiner, was der Gruppenname suggeriert und heizt mal hier eine Diskussion oder so an???”

put on the chopping block to entertain an audience. Unique to these fora are the specific situational norms that allow the flamer to let off steam without offending anybody in this context. Thus, the expression of “stage flaming” seems fit. On the one hand, these flames are purposefully enacted and are not meant to be intentional offences; on the other hand, these flaming acts need to have an audience to be complete and reach their full pragmatic force like any play that is staged for spectators. Example (14) is a brief exchange between two flamers on the topic of “Who is the bigger dipshit?” taken from <http://www.flamewarriors.net> on (March 2011). The topic of the discussion already sets the tone for a ludic exchange:

(14) Murderface: Discuss fuckers 🤔  
 Murderface: We have got a tight race here folks.  
 sluggish: Listen up jackass, I’ll discuss when I’m good and ready to discuss. Nobody tells me when to discuss, got that asshole?

The user “Murderface” already makes it clear in her/his first utterance by means of an emoticon that his/her order *discuss fuckers* is not to be taken seriously. The flame exchange consists basically of name-calling between the participants i.e. *fuckers*, *jackass*, *asshole*. Also the choice of pseudonyms “Murderface” and “sluggish” fits the jokingly mischievous context.

In its playful nature, online “stage flaming” appears to have offline influences. This circumstance may also prove insightful for the concept of hurtful flaming online in the future, since it may show that destructive flaming should not be considered a purely online phenomenon. There are various historically well-established practices of ritualized insults that are ludic at their core.<sup>108</sup> Thomson (1935) provides an early description of a swearing ritual. He discovered that the custom of “organised” or “licensed” swearing and obscenities was a core part of Australian aboriginals’ cultural practice in North Queensland. Friendly banter among close friends (Leech 1983) may also be a practice of influence for online “stage flaming”. Example (15) is a short exchange between two girls engaging in friendly banter (Allan & Burridge 2006:88):

(15) A: Gimme the smoke if you want it lit Eggbert.  
 B: Here shit-for-brains. [Passes the cigarette]

<sup>108</sup> The practice of medieval “flyting” (Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000) is probably one of the earliest forms of ritualized insults for which we have records. However, this form of verbal duelling was not playful in nature. Flyting battles often ended in physical assaults. As such, they are not comparable to the ludic forms.

A: Geez you're a fuckin sook I swear to God.

B: Shut up fucker.

Example (15) from the face-face-conversation does not appear to be so far removed from what we saw in example (14) in the flame forum. The exchange also includes orders (*gimme the smoke, shut up fucker*) and name-calling (*shit-for-brains, sook, fucker*). Friendly banter is also not meant to insult the other person but functions as a linguistic means to reinforce group solidarity. A similar situation may be the case in these online fora.

Another offline form of ritualized insults is practiced among African-Americans, often among adolescent males, and is called “playing the dozens” (also known as “sounding” or “snapping”) (Labov 1972). Also this form may reappear as online “stage flaming”. This form of verbal combat, often in rhyme-form, includes insults against one’s contestant’s mother or other family members. The insults are frequently sexual in nature as examples (16) and (17) illustrate (Abrahams 1962:210):

(16) I hate to talk about your mother,  
She's a good old soul.  
She's got a ten-ton p - - - y  
And a rubber a - - - - e.  
She got hair on her p - - - y  
That sweep the floor.  
She got knobs on her titties  
That open the door.

(17) I f - - - d your mother on an electric wire.  
I made her p - - - y rise higher and higher.  
I f - - - d your mother between two cans.  
Up jumped a baby and hollered, “Superman.”

A similar example, though not in rhyme form, is found in a discussion thread of alt.flame titled “your mother” (Aug. 1999). It appears like a more extreme imitation of the offline form of “playing the dozen” when the user “shaman Delaney” initiates the interaction with the following words:

(18) your mother so dump she studies for a drug test  
The bitch also a crackhead cocksucker.  
your mother is Transexual confuse.  
She a transexual bisexual bitch who would do any thing for crack.  
I heard she suck bill clinton dick for a good price.  
People says she suck all the world leader dick.  
Your mother stink  
Why don't she wash up

all the time i am by the bitch  
she always stinking the place up  
why don't the dirty bitch take a bath is is because she scare  
i mean it only soap and water

The user “shaman Delaney” uses an abundant number of very crude and sexually loaded offences. In the comment she/he also refers to the mother’s personal hygiene, mental capabilities and apparent drug addiction in a very insulting manner. As it is the first entry in a discussion thread and is not addressed at anybody particularly it remains an imitation of sounding. For a traditional “sounding” duel it should be clear whose mother is referred to in an offence. That is important since contestants are meant to protect the family honour in such a ritual. Also the co-commentators do not answer back in kind but rather flame “shaman Delaney” for her/his erroneous use of English and her/his choice of words. This may of course also have to do with the fact that commentators of various cultural backgrounds participate in this forum, and therefore, not everybody may be familiar with this type of “sounding” ritual. Nevertheless, examples (16), (17) and (18) share similarities with the original form of “playing the dozen” in their ritualized nature of offending a mother by means of sexual insults.

Schwegler (2007:115–116) describes a comparable ludic practice to “playing the dozen” among speakers of Palenquero creole in Mexico, called “vociferación” (similar to snapping), where participants insult each other to entertain and “show off” in front of an audience. The audience’s presence is central to the performance of this practice. In this aspect, there is another link to flame fora where the audience also appears to take a central role in these flame wars.

In summary, online “stage flaming” appears to show offline influences of already well-established forms of ludic verbal combat in face-to-face conversation. Central to all of them is the performance and entertainment character for the participants and the audience. At the present “stage flaming” is also the only type of flaming that can be conceptually differentiated from impoliteness in CMC. This distinction is only possible because of the specifically declared context in which these flame exchanges take place. Also, the similarities to offline forms suggest that both hurtful and playful flaming should not be considered as a purely online phenomenon.

### 3.10.2. *Trolling*

Another form of disrespectful and aggressive behaviour of users in the cyberspace – closely related to flaming – is known as trolling. While there is a variety of disruptive online behaviour that has been assigned the label of flaming, the same can be said for trolling. Though academic literature on this phenomenon is sparse, it has been most often described in discussion fora and newsgroups. Nevertheless, trolling can occur in any form of CMC that allows conversations among groups of users over a period of time. In other words, all forms of CMC where users can establish a history of interaction (e.g. reader responses, chats, blogs). This history of interaction is an important factor for successful trolling as will be discussed in this section. Herring et al. (2002:372) define this type of behaviour as follows: “Trolling entails luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions” which “often starts with a message that is intentionally incorrect but not overly controversial.” This may be in form of a naïve-sounding question or a false statement. Golder & Donath (2004) note that initial trolling messages may not even be distinguishable from any other message that is posted by a sincere user. Herring et al. (2002:372) adds that while such messages are “deceptive” by definition, it is important that a troller does not initially compose messages that are too obviously misleading. Thereby, a troller ensures that she/he can trigger as many reactions of unsuspecting people as possible. While the term troller refers to the person who sends a message, troll refers to the message itself.<sup>109</sup> The concept may be related to Norse mythology where trolls were known for their rather malevolent character (Bergstrom 2011).

Similarly to hurtful flaming, Golder & Donath (2004) highlight that trollers also have a negative speaker attitude. They will place trolls in a conversation with the specific aim “to cause irritation to others” (Crystal 2001:52) or as Bergstrom (2011) puts it: “To troll is to have negative intents, to wish harm or at least discomfort upon one’s audience”. Trolling attacks are, just like in some cases of hurtful flaming, initiated for the personal entertainment of a troller. Very often newbies to a forum will fall prey to troll baits (Herring et al. 2002:372) as they are not yet familiar with the forum’s discussion culture and netiquette. Also, newbies may not be acquainted with all the regular sincere members yet. They do not know what to expect from each

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<sup>109</sup> In practice, however, the term troll and troller are often used interchangeably to refer to the person.

individual. They are thus an easy game for trolls to draw their victims into a futile exchange. The second obvious targets are naive users who may find it generally difficult to differentiate between serious co-commentators and trolls in a forum or newsgroup.

Trolls are always insincere deceivers whose strategy usually follows a simple pattern: Initially they will try to win a discussion group's trust and once the group has accepted him/her as a member after a period of time, the troll will launch a first troll attack under the cover of her/his established pseudo-identity. Donath (2001:43) states: "Trolling is a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players. The troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group's common interests and concerns [...]" but ultimately the troll has a hidden agenda of their own that is not in the interest of a group. According to Golder & Donath (2004) trolls have to rely on this fostered group-relationship to guarantee a certain level of trust among the members. Once the troll has built a history of interaction, he/she can successfully deceive their victims:

It is important that the victims are indeed baited before the Troll engages in intimidation, because an established relationship is necessary for intimidation to be most effective, so that the intimidated does not simply give up and leave [...].

Since it is difficult or often impossible to decide whether somebody is a troll with a hidden agenda, it makes it not only very hard for victims to identify real trolls, but even more so for researchers who would like to track down real trolls. Having said that, it appears to be a common practice that initial trolls are subtler to bait co-commentators. However, over time trolls tend to become more severe and more intimidating. Donath (2001:42) gives the example of a user called "Cheryl" who appeared on a wedding newsgroup where members virtually met to discuss their wedding preparations and to share tips for a successful day. One of "Cheryl's" strategies was to remark on other people's suggestions for the wedding day: For example, "Cheryl" would remark that balloons were "vulgar" when a person suggested using balloons for decoration. Next, she would proclaim that cards with engraving are the only viable option "for people with taste" after the discussion turned to the cheaper option of laser-printed invitations. Donath (2001:42) further explains that whereas it was normal for all members to comment on other people's ideas, "Cheryl's" contributions stood out as more imperative and formal in tone. Ultimately, her approach also changed and she turned to attacking members with openly offensive



language. At one point, certain members became suspect of her behaviour and accused her of being a troller.

Nevertheless, ultimately a group can never be sure of a user's intentions unless a troller admits her/his deed as Bergstrom (2011) states: "A troll is not a troll until they are caught". Once the group catches a person or at least once members strongly suspect an individual of being a troller, a common strategy appears to be to ignore the offender. Thereby users want to ensure that the troller has no more comments to "feed on"<sup>110</sup> and he/she cannot prolong a pointless conversation. Some sites also allow users to filter out messages of the respective user from the overall discussion thread (Turner et al. 2005). In any case, such trollers can be quite detrimental to community activities since they disrupt ongoing conversations and may decrease the trust users have towards others and more specifically raise suspicion towards members that have newly joined the group (Dahlberg 2001; Donath 2001:43). Finally, the distribution of false information can also be dangerous. Donath (2001:45) cites the case of a troller who advised users on a discussion group of cat owners to spray their pets with a certain type of chemical liquid to prevent them from damaging the interior of apartments. While some users were sure they had been trolled, others took it to be a serious advice. Donath reports that these users apparently did not know that such a "treatment" could have horrific health consequences for their pets. In such cases, as Hardaker (2010:229) argues, it could be even worse to ignore the troller and users may feel obliged to protect naive users from hurting their pets.<sup>111</sup> Wikipedia is also plagued by so-called "Wikitrolls". In an interview, Jimmy Wales, co-founder of the online encyclopaedia, explains that the organisation needs hundreds of volunteers to trace trollers whose main aim is to continuously add wrong information to the site and defame other contributors (Adams 2011). Here the spread of wrong information can be especially detrimental to the site's reputation whose founders are trying very hard to establish themselves as reliable and accurate encyclopaedia despite the fact that the work is done by volunteers around the world.

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<sup>110</sup> "Do not feed the troll" has become a popular expression in newsgroups and fora to warn users from interacting with trollers (cf. also Hardaker 2010:234).

<sup>111</sup> Hardaker (2010:229, emphasis in original) cites the post of a user who feels the need to protect newbies and their animals from troller D's misleading advice: "**D is a troll and posts dangerous advice to newbies ... trust me, I would filter him in a second if I didn't think his advice is dangerous and could hurt someone.**"

To understand how users deal with trolls and most importantly explore how users identify and define trolling behaviour themselves, Hardaker (2010:224–225) conducted a longitudinal study on rec.equestrian, a USENET newsgroup for horse owners and fans. During the group’s almost ten years of existence, trolls were also frequent guests there. Similar to first order studies of (im)politeness, Hardaker takes a layperson’s perspective and analyses 2,000 hits where users offered their own interpretations of the concept “troll” (including “troller”, “trolling” etc.) in respect to incidences on the discussion group. Based on her data, Hardaker (2010:237) concludes that users, contrary to her expectations, agree quite consistently on what actually constitutes a troll/er. Based on this newsgroup’s established norms the following four characteristics emerged to describe a troller’s profile: “deception”, “aggression”, “disruption” and “success”. The first three categories describe core characteristics of a troller: She/he aims to disrupt ongoing conversations by means of deceptive and aggressive behaviour. These first order findings are also in line with theoretical second order conceptualisations of trolling in past literature. The “success” category refers to users’ evaluation of a troller’s impact on a group. Users define a troller by the type of troll messages a person produced and the reactions he/she received. Example (19) illustrates this point (Hardaker 2010:235, emphasis and bracketed annotation in the original):

(19) Umm ... E? Do you think F made up her hot\_ail address all special for us, just for this post? (Google is your friend.)Do you think she really has a husband? Do you think sheis really even a \_she\_? Wait. I get it!!!  
**You’re trolling the troll.** Had me going for a minute there. <g> [*grin*]

Hardaker (2010:237) then proposes a definition that effectively consolidates all key aspects of trolling:

A troller is a CMC user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement.

How then can destructive flaming (this excludes “stage flaming”) and trolling be conceptually distinguished? How to identify linguistic phenomena as the rants of a flamer or the bait of a troller? What both types have in common is the aim to interfere with the flow of an ongoing conversation and both pose destructive moves in a conversation (cf. Kienpointner 2008:243 on destructive arguments). Also, flamers and

trollers alike have a negative attitude towards their targets. In both cases the communicative behaviour of the speaker may be emotionally upsetting for the recipients. However, the personal entertainment factor at the cost of the victims seems to be a much stronger motivation for trolls. In regard to flaming, there may be cases of rants for the personal entertainment of a user but not necessarily so. Despite the fact that trolling and flaming have a negative effect on individual victims of such attacks, both forms can help to foster group-relations among the sincere members (Herring et al. 2002:373).

Herring et al. (2002:372) attempt to draw a dividing line between the two concepts based on the type of users they choose as targets of their attacks: “[...] the goal of flame bait is to incite any and all readers, whereas the goal of a stereotypical troll is to draw in particularly naive or vulnerable readers.” In other words, while a flamer does not seem to select his/her target in advance but rather reacts in situ, trolls appear to carefully pick their targets before they strike. Flames also differ from trolls in the sense that flammers do not try to fake goodwill but act openly and without any pretence in an offensive way. In other words, while a troll will always try to convince others of their pseudo-intentions, a flamer acts sincerely in the sense that she/he does not wilfully deceive an interlocutor about his/her intentions. Trolls are also distinctive in regard to the intensity of the attack. While flaming can be an on-off affair, trolling generally occurs over a longer period of time. In Herring’s (2002) study, the troll “Kent” was active on the observed forum for almost two months, and she cites the case of an even more determined troll who caused disruption on a site for over a year.

In practice, matters turn out to be difficult when researchers want to assign language behaviour in their data to one of the two types. While a troll bait is not necessarily insulting, consecutive trolls may be very offensive. Thus, what a researcher first identifies as offensive language by a flamer may in fact turn out to be the advanced stage of a trolling attack. Here researchers need to rely on situational context information. For example, a longitudinal study of users’ comment history may help researchers to shed light on the intentions of a person. A user’s flame-like behaviour in combination with their repetitive attempts to draw others into pointless and distractive discussions may be an indication that one is dealing with a troll. However, also here opinions may vary on what is to be considered “pointless and

distractive”. Nevertheless, we can conclude that flaming may be a verbal means that trolls apply as one of their strategies to bait their victims. However, a flamer’s offensive behaviour does not automatically make him/her a troll.

From a face work perspective a troll’s actions can be a threat to the face of an individual or an entire group and in turn may be evaluated as impolite by them. Such negative behaviour may be experienced as even more face aggravating if the troll also engages in flame-like behaviour. The face damage experienced by newbies or naive users may also be enhanced when they come to realise that they were the only ones who took the bait while more experienced users managed to unmask a troll. However, experienced group members may also come to rescue and save the victims’ face by counter attacking the troll. Finally, trolls’ intentions to cause harm to their victims is a key driver for their behaviour, and their offences are never incidental or accidental forms of impoliteness (cf. Bousfield 2008a for a discussion of these concepts).

Flaming and trolling are just two forms of negatively marked online behaviour. There are a number of other social concepts to describe types of abusive (linguistic) behaviour on the net. These activities are often subsumed under the umbrella term of cyberviolence and may also have legal consequences for the offenders (cf. Cucereanu 2008). Herring (2002) defines cyberviolence as “online behavior that constitutes or leads to assault against the well-being (physical, psychological, emotional) of an individual or a group.” Herring stresses that such behaviour is mainly situated in the online space; however, there may be instances of online aggression which are extended to offline spheres. The following section will give a brief overview of the most common forms of cyberviolence. These forms do not appear fruitful for considerations of online impoliteness.

### *3.10.3. Cyberstalking, online harassment, cyberbullying and happy slapping*

A cyberstalker is a person who gathers private information or spreads misinformation about her/his victim via the Internet with the aim to damage the person’s reputation and threaten their victim. It always involves a break in privacy laws. For example, a cyberstalker may share collected private data with third parties e.g. by publishing a personal picture of her/his victim on a sex site. Other characteristic behaviour is the harassment of a person directly via e-mails. Following activities are typical of cyberstalking (Bocij 2006):

1. Making threats: Most cyberstalking incidents involve threat made against the victim, usually made by e-mail or via instant messaging.
2. False accusations: Many cyberstalkers attempt to harm the reputation of a victim by posting false information about them.
3. False victimization: Some cyberstalkers attempt to escape blame for their actions by falsely claiming that their victims have harassed them.

A typical case of cyberstalking is cited in Döring (2003:271) about right-wing extremists who use the Internet to obtain information about their critics and enemies. Subsequently, they utilize the gathered data to threaten their victims via online platforms or even pursue them in person.

Online harassment is another form of abusive behaviour suggested by Herring (2002). She defines this type of anti-social behaviour as

computer-mediated words, gestures, and/or actions that tend to annoy, alarm and abuse another person [...]. A crucial component of harassment is that the behaviour is repeated – a single instance of abuse, such as an insulting email message, does not generally constitute harassment – and persistent, even after the harasser has been told to desist.

Herring (2002) does not define trolling as online harassment arguing that trolling focuses on inexperienced users. She also does not consider flaming as online harassment claiming that flaming is rather “issue-specific”. Herring offers no further explanations for this distinction. Based on what has been discussed in the previous sections on trolling and flaming, Herring’s reasons for her categorization are not helpful in drawing a clear line between the concepts. In this study, trolling is understood as a form of online harassment as it is meant to repetitively abuse another person or group. Flaming may also be subsumed under this cover term if it is targeted at the same person over a certain period of time (e.g. in flame wars).

Cyberbullying is yet another umbrella term to refer to negatively marked behaviour in CMC. Erdur-Baker (2009:109) defines cyberbullying as “hurtful and intended communication activity using any form of technological device such as the internet or mobile phones.” In fact any of the above mentioned forms of aggression could also be subsumed under the label of cyberbullying.

Finally, happy slapping describes the behaviour of aggressors who attack their victim in real life e.g. in the street while somebody else is filming the scene. The main aim is to distribute the footage on the web to psychologically degrade the victim after the physical assault (cf. Krowatschek 2009:30).

#### *3.10.4. Possible motives and causes of conflictive and offensive behaviour online*

In academic literature numerous hypotheses have been provided that try to pinpoint and explain the causes for conflictive and offensive behaviour online. Especially in the fields of sociology and psychology researchers have investigated possible drivers that could be responsible for the uninhibited conduct of CMC participants. However, a lot of the research remains speculative. At this point, it is also not clear whether the nature and degree of such negative behaviour is unique to CMC as is often claimed. Since it is beyond the scope of a linguist's tool kit to empirically answer why people behave so negatively online, in the following, I will provide a review of the ongoing discussion that mainly takes place in the sociological and psychological fields of research.

Many scholars speculate that the causes for flaming, trolling and other types of conflictive and offensive behaviour in CMC could be related to the technical characteristics of the medium and its limited social context cues (Johnson, Cooper, & Chin 2008:419; Turnage 2007:43). For instance, body language, intonation, gestures or the age, social status and sex of a person are typical non-verbal cues present in face-to-face communication. These variables are said to influence message interpretation. However, in medial written forms of CMC these elements are generally absent or unreliable since they are not verifiable by co-participants.<sup>112</sup> Based on these considerations, many researchers deduced a causal relationship between the setting and the resulting behaviour and concluded that online “[r]educed social cues [...] lead to correspondingly reduced social constraints and a reduced impact of social norms” (O’Sullivan & Flanagin 2003:71). Basically, many argued that reduced social cues provide people with relative anonymity on the net and scholars speculated that it is this anonymity that creates a feeling of “de-individuation” which in turn promotes a violation of social conventions (O’Sullivan & Flanagin 2003:76; Postmes & Spears 1998).

For example, in the case of reader responses, one could hypothesize that the relative anonymity, as well as the technical ease and the speediness of message transmission (Dürscheid 2005) may invite people to feel more uninhibited. This environment could thus be ideal for users who just want to “let off steam” (Baron

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<sup>112</sup> For example, a man may use a female user name or an elderly person may pretend to be a teenager online.

2008:112) and engage in offensive behaviour. Indeed, Upadhyay's (2010:124) study of reader responses on the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* suggests that the variable anonymity appeared to affect the verbal behaviour of users negatively. The author (Upadhyay 2010:124) found "more harshly worded" comments on the *Washington Post* than on the *New York Times* and concluded that this phenomenon may be explained through the different user name policies of the newspapers. While *Washington Post* contributors were allowed to use pseudonyms, *New York Times* commentators commonly disclosed their first and/or last name. While anonymity may have indeed played a role in the *Washington Post* contributions, it remains a speculative conclusion. Other yet unidentified factors could have been responsible for the difference in the results of the two newspapers (e.g. topic, moderation policies, gender etc.).<sup>113</sup>

Nevertheless, also established news media producers have started to voice their discontent with anonymous users. In Switzerland, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* journalists proclaim that readers often are just contributing to vent their anger. Reports by the *SonntagsZeitung* (2008) and British media outlets *Times Online* (2008) and *Guardian Online* (Adams 2011) assert the influence of anonymity on the communication behaviour of users. Apparently, an increasing number of audience members overwhelm newspapers with particularly unacceptable reader responses. One possible solution, currently debated by newspapers, is to tighten the rules for audience participation. A case in point is a recent debate titled "Should internet commentators use their real names?" on *Guardian Online*,<sup>114</sup> in which news contributor Rachel Cooke shares her view on why she dislikes anonymous posters. She got personally upset after numerous commentators posted offensive comments in reaction to one of her news pieces up to the point that she even considered taking legal steps.

For every person who merely disagreed with what I'd written, there were two or three who had simply resorted to abuse. One – who knows why – said that I could not find a man "to inseminate me". Another insisted that my sisters – I have three – all dislike me. Some of it was clearly defamatory; one remarked that I was an alcoholic who began every day with a vodka. After I'd dealt with my nausea, which took a while, I spent the rest of my morning wondering if I should call a libel lawyer.

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<sup>113</sup> Here the tools of psychologists could help. For example, an interview with the commentators of the two newspapers could have shed light on the results.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/25/internet-anonymity-slander-free-speech> (accessed Jan. 17, 2011).

The Swiss news outlet *Tagesanzeiger.ch* has already taken action and explicitly state in their house rules that users need to use their “real names”.<sup>115</sup> Users with pseudonyms will not see their comment published: “Kommentare mit Fantasienamen oder mit ganz offensichtlich falschen Namen werden [...] nicht veröffentlicht.” However, the question here is, whether the fact that “real names” are requested will make a difference. Users can still dwell in relative anonymity and invent real sounding names, which could in fact, not be the actual names of users. This could also have been the case for the online commentators on the *New York Times* in the previously mentioned study by Upadhyay (2010). Warner (2008) from *Times Online* also argues that providing an e-mail address and a location is not enough to identify a person successfully. Despite the unresolved question around pseudonyms, long-term moderator Sara Bee notes that once she would contact people via e-mail to rebuke them for their behaviour, it had a positive effect (Adams 2011). She suggests that users appear to suddenly realize that they are no completely anonymous and apologize for their behaviour.

Though anonymity seems to be key variable in people’s conduct online, it is more likely to be a combination of factors that may influence participants’ behaviour. Taking a cognitive perspective in his book *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, Suler (2004) proposes that the disinhibition effect in computer-mediated settings may be triggered by the following social drivers: Users’ perception of anonymity and invisibility of the web may give them the feeling that they can act in a more unrestrained way. On the one hand, they may think “You don’t know me”. On the other hand, they may believe “You can’t see me”. The psychologist also argues that the technical factor of asynchrony could convince users that they do not have to deal with the immediate consequences of their online behaviour. Suler calls this the “See you later” effect. In other words, users have the possibility to create a distance between themselves and their online actions. This factor could in theory well be interlinked with the aspect of anonymity. If users are not easily identifiable and traceable online, they may consequently think that they cannot be directly held

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<sup>115</sup> The trend to prohibit the use of pseudonyms is notable also in different spheres of the Internet. The 2011 launched online social network Google+ (<https://plus.google.com>), for example, blocked the use of pseudonyms for users.



accountable for their online actions.<sup>116</sup> Finally, Suler hypothesizes that users may possibly experience a sense of minimized authority in a CMC setting. Since the social status of users remains hidden or is often not verifiable, the idea that “We’re equals” could also influence the behaviour of users in a negative way. This point of view is a continuation of what early studies in the 1980s and 1990s already supposed (e.g. Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire 1984; Siegel et al. 1986; Spears & Lea 1994; Sproull & Kiesler 1991).

Although such arguments could indeed be plausible, the bulk of sociological and psychological research, which so far has predominantly focused on flaming, remains inconclusive and chiefly theoretical. While several studies support the argument that CMC might encourage uninhibited behaviour such as flames,<sup>117</sup> others object to these presumptions (O’Sullivan & Flanagin 2003:71).<sup>118</sup> Based on the present state of research on flaming, Alonzo & Aiken (2004:205) conclude that sociologists still need to test motives for flaming on a more systematic empirical level. Some researchers even doubt that hostile behaviour including flaming is confined to and triggered through an online setting. Döring (2003:156) is very hesitant to believe that flaming is specific to CMC and suggests that it remains to be seen empirically in how far this phenomenon differs qualitatively and quantitatively from offensive language use in heated face-to-face interactions as found in e.g. exploitive talk-shows and parliamentary debates. This is in line with O’Sullivan & Flanagin (2003:71), who

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<sup>116</sup> The negative power of anonymity paired with the physical distance among human beings is not a new phenomenon and unique to the Internet but has already previously been researched in a number of “offline” contexts. Biologist and ethnologist Konrad Lorenz (1966, chapter 13; cf. also Lakoff (2005:32)) claimed that the physical distance between humans unlocks aggression and especially his/her inhibition to kill. He gives the example of modern weapons, which allow people to kill humans at a great distance (e.g. bombs). Since they are not directly confronted with their victims and not traceable as murderers, the killing becomes “easier” from a psychological perspective. Less cruel but nevertheless also very typical of the deindividuation effect through anonymity and distance can be noted in car traffic where people shout at each other’s driving style but do so at a safe distance in their own vehicles (Tannen 1998). Finally, the philosopher Schopenhauer (1891) noted over a century ago that the custom of many news publishing houses to allow journalists to anonymously publish their articles should be stopped. He argued that this practice supported a reporter’s feeling of unaccountability and eased the spread of lies in this profession.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. Gurak (2001); Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire (1984); Siegel et al. (1986); Sproull & Kiesler (1986), as cited in O’Sullivan & Flanagin (2003:71).

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Culnan & Markus (1987); Lea et al. (1992); Postmes, Spears, & Lea (1998); Spears & Lea (1994); Walther (1994), as cited in O’Sullivan & Flanagin (2003:71).

note that “messages that convey hostility, profanity, and blunt criticism are found in interactions conducted via any mediated channel (for example telephone, voice-mail, post-it notes, letters), as well as face-to-face.” For example, Lakoff (2003:37) notes growing levels of incivility across many political and public contexts across the United States. She mentions the characteristic use of bleeps across TV shows in the US to protect the audience from coarse language. On the other hand, she cites incidences of a number of high-profile political figures who uses references like “bitch”, “fags”, or “bunch of whores” to address their colleagues in public settings of “high gravitas”. The question whether an interaction takes place in a private or public setting could thus also another important factor here.

Despite the fact that many researchers expect the technical characteristics of the medium to provide the key to negative conduct in the cyberspace, O’Sullivan & Flanagan (2003:716) argue against a technological deterministic view to explain negative online behaviour such as flaming: “[F]laming should be seen as a communicative episode fundamentally independent of, although possibly shaped by, the communication channel.” They stress the importance of analysing and interpreting communicative acts from an interactional and contextually situated point of view with a special focus on multi-layered and evolving norms that may come into play for the interpretation of a flaming incidence. In conclusion, the underlying theoretical assumption is that the technological context alone appears non-sufficient to explain the behaviour of individuals.

Their point of view also reflects linguists’ general movement away from using medium-specific arguments to more user-related arguments to explain language phenomena in CMC. According to Androutsopoulos (2006:421), this approach of “technological determinism” to explain language use was especially common in the early works of CMC research. Franco et al.’s (1995:13) work is an exception to this rule. In 1995, they already argued that a lot of research failed to consider social factors including the individual character of any person that will “influence all communication, both via computer and face-to-face”. Döring (2003:156) goes a step further and hypothesizes that the overall heterogeneity of communities typically found in online spaces may be responsible for more conflictive situations. For example, McKee (2002:425–426), who studied interracial interactions on forum discussion boards, assumed that cultural differences among the participants could have been the trigger for the occurrence of misunderstanding and conflict in the posts

she had analysed. Also Alonzo & Aiken (2004), in their study of flaming, conclude that personality traits could be key to predict whether a person will engage in flaming or refrain from participating in such negatively marked CMC behaviour: “The results of this study suggest that disinhibition seekers are willing to take risks and might therefore engage in flaming for passing time and for entertainment” (Alonzo & Aiken 2004:211). Independent of the situational context, personality traits also appear to help predict cursing behaviour. In his psychological analysis of swearing, Jay (2000) notes a possible influence of people’s character on cursing. Jay predicts that people who easily get upset also tend to retreat more quickly to cursing for venting their anger. Especially people that display a so-called “antisocial personality” appear to show a stronger tendency to display cursing behaviour. According to Jay (2000:114), people with an antisocial character makeup tend to be “guiltless with no clear sense of conscience. They can lose control of their temper easily and unpredictably, resulting in brutal attacks on innocent bystanders.”<sup>119</sup> Based on the scholars’ arguments one could conclude that it is more likely that people with an antisocial personality, in contrast to people with a more temperate and self-controlled character, will engage in offensive and aggressive behaviour online. As such, the online context may only have a secondary effect on the behaviour of users.

Alonzo & Aiken’s (2004:205) discussion of different research attempts to explain flaming behaviour demonstrates that there is no straightforward answer to account for offensive behaviour online. We may be dealing with a complex interplay of a numerous situational, medium- and person-related factors that could theoretically be accountable for negative conduct in CMC. Based on their discussion, I am going to conclude this section with a comprehensive summary of these factors (see Table 6). Importantly, psychologists and sociologists still need to further investigate the effect of these variables. Also scholars of these fields have yet to discover the influence of the individual variables in different online situations. Table 6 is by no means to be understood as exhaustive.

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<sup>119</sup> Interestingly, Jay (2000:108) also suggests that the degree to which a person is offended by somebody else’s behaviour depends on their character and is a result of a “personality development and social awareness”.

**Table 6.** Variables that may influence conflictive behaviour online

Situational factors	Medium-related factors	Person-related factors
Sensitive topics	Distance between interlocutors	Acquaintance levels among interlocutors
Community of practice norms	Level of anonymity	Social and cultural differences
	Missing visual and social cues	Deindividuation and depersonalization
		Gender and age
		Psychological, behavioral makeup of interlocutors

In terms of situational factors, sensitive topics may cause participants to react more emotionally and as a result more aggressively in an online conversation. Also, existing norms in a CofP may reinforce or restrain people in their behaviour. As previously discussed, medium-related factors such as the physical distance among interlocutors as well as their relative anonymity can affect language behaviour. This is also linked to missing visual and social context cues. Despite the fact that there are a number of factors attributable to the medium, one must acknowledge that person-related factors also could play a central role for user behaviour independent of the online setting. For example, the historical relations among interlocutors may determine their communicative behaviour. As acquaintance levels increase, it could well be that people are less likely to attack each other online. Obviously, this could also work the other way round if two people are not on good terms. Social and cultural differences may also cause friction in online discussions. This may be paired with a feeling of deindividuation and depersonalisation that people could experience. On top, despite the fact that in an online setting, gender and age are difficult to trace, they can influence any type of interaction and thus also apply to people's online behaviour. Finally, as previously mentioned, every person has a specific personality makeup and there may be people that are more likely to engage in conflict than others.

In conclusion, I would like to stress again that much of what has been mentioned here is speculative. It remains a challenge to understand the true motives for conflictive and offensive behaviour online. Linguists can observe language use; it is in the hands of the sociologists and psychologists to disentangle the question why users behave negatively online.

## 4. IMPOLITENESS IN PRACTICE: ANALYSIS PROPER

### 4.1. The data set

For the empirical analysis in this study a data set of reader responses from the following five British news media sites was selected:

- The two “heavy-weight” quality up-market newspapers *Guardian Online* & *Telegraph Online*,
- The two mid-market newspapers *Express Online* & *Mail Online*,
- and the “red-tops” down-market newspaper *Sun Online*.<sup>120</sup>

This categorization is based on Jucker (1992:48) and the organization of British Papers<sup>121</sup> and reflects a combination of the socio-economic profile of a newspaper’s readership and the type of news content these papers usually offer. Though Jucker’s categorization was originally designed for the print editions of these papers, it can also safely be applied to the online editions in regard to content. However, there may be slight changes online in regard to the socio-economic footprint of the various newspaper audiences since nowadays visitors from around the globe can potentially access the news sites online. This aspect becomes clear when looking at the geographical location of users per online news media. Based on a report by ABCe (status March 2010), which was published just months after the data for this study had been collected, the geographical makeup for four of the five news media evaluated in this linguistic study indicated that 50% or more of all site visitors are from outside the UK. The percentage of the UK unique visitors per month of the news media’s total audience looked as follows in March 2010: 34% of *Telegraph Online*, 35% of *Mail Online*, 40% of *Guardian Online* and 47% of *Sun Online* were visitors from within the UK. Put differently, more than half of the readership for these four newspapers was located outside the UK. Geographical audience profiles for *Express Online* were not surveyed by the ABCe and could also not be retrieved from any other trustable source. Nevertheless, to get an impression, I checked user profiles of commentators who had answered the question “Where do you live?” on *Express Online*. Out of 67

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<sup>120</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk>; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk>; <http://www.express.co.uk>; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk>; <http://www.thesun.co.uk>.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. <http://www.britishpapers.co.uk> (accessed Jan. 24, 2011).

unique users who had produced comments in my data set, 13 did not indicate a location. The rest all indicated that they lived at various locations in the UK. Of course, this is only a small spectrum of the visitors to the site and one can never be sure whether people provide their real home locations. However, I think it is quite interesting that no user indicated a place outside the UK. Overall, the figures on the geographical footprints demonstrate that one needs to take into consideration that the audience and thus the socio-economic profiles are likely to differ for the online and for the print editions. While the bulk of the offline editions will be read by people in the UK, the online editions reach a much larger and more heterogeneous audience. The one exception may be indeed *Express Online* where geographical overlaps between the online and offline audience may be more likely.

In terms of utilization, these online media sources were all among the most visited news sites in the UK around the time of data collection. This was the main factor to support my selection of news sites for this study. Their overall popularity can be measured based on the number of unique visitors per day (this also includes visitors from outside the UK). According to an ABCe report from January 2010,<sup>122</sup> *Mail Online* was taking the lead with 2.16 million unique browsers per day on average. *Guardian Online* saw around 1.9 million visitors, closely followed by *Telegraph Online* and *Sun Online* with 1.7 and 1.3 million visitors on average per day. *Express Online*, not audited by ABCe, claimed to have just fewer than 2 million unique visitors per day.<sup>123</sup> Therefore, this figure needs to be treated with some reservation.

The collection of the articles and the reader responses took place during the period of September 7 until 20, 2009. I took snapshots of the articles and associated reader responses at the end of each day around the same time. To increase the chance of interactive debates among users, I collected articles which had sparked the most discussion during a day. I chose these most productive sections because I assumed the discussions there would be more controversial and thus also a good starting point for conflictive and potentially impolite data. To make sure that I had selected the most active discussion threads, I could partly rely on the newspapers' statistical tools to identify the most productive reader response sections. At the time of the data

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<sup>122</sup> Status Jan. 2010 based on the ABCe audit; cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/feb/25/abces-mail-online> (accessed Jan. 24, 2011).

<sup>123</sup> Cf. <http://www.winchesterjournalism.co.uk> (accessed Jan. 31, 2011).

collection, *Guardian Online*, *Mail Online* and *Sun Online* offered a daily ranking of the “most commented” news items.<sup>124</sup> *Express Online* and *Telegraph Online* did not offer such a statistical function. In such cases, I chose the landing pages of the respective “Comment” sections and manually selected the most discussed articles from there. Initially, a second red-tops popular online news provider, *Mirror Online*, was also part of the data set. However, due to the low reader response traffic per article on the site, this subset had to be excluded for the sake of comparability with the other news providers’ comment sections.

To cut down the number of comments per article to a manageable size without losing the chance to capture the development of interactive discussions among users, I selected the first 50 reader responses that were written as reactions to each article in my data set. The core analysis is based on a total data set of 1,750 user comments (i.e. 350 reader responses per newspaper) (see Table 7). This data set was used to analyse the various strategies and reactive-interactive patterns in the sequential discourse dynamics of the impolite conflictive exchanges. The data was also used to identify the different types of personal attacks which commentators used to target other participants in reader response discussions. Finally, the analysis for the linguistic features to reinforce the personal attacks were also based on this corpus (i.e. name-calling and swearing).

**Table 7.** The core data set characteristics

Newspaper	Articles n=	Comments n=	Words in comments n=	Words in quotes n=	Ø words per comment n=*	% of quotes in comments	Market segment
<i>Express Online</i>	7	350	51,525	10,164	147	20%	mid
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	7	350	36,631	383	105	1%	up
<i>Guardian Online</i>	7	350	28,270	3002	81	11%	up
<i>Mail Online</i>	7	350	17,147	175	49	1%	mid
<i>Sun Online</i>	7	350	13,001	38	37	0%	down
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>1,750</b>	<b>146,574</b>	<b>13,762</b>	<b>n.a.</b>	<b>n.a.</b>	<b>n.a.</b>

\* incl. quotes

In sum, the collection consists of 35 articles with their associated discussion threads (i.e. 350 comments per newspaper).<sup>125</sup> In total, that accounts for a split of 7 articles per newspaper. For the specific source details of each item in my data set see Table 39 to Table 41 in the appendix. Of each of these 7 articles the first 50 comments were

<sup>124</sup> *Guardian Online* has recently removed the option “most commented” from their site. Users can now choose “most viewed” or “latest” articles (status Jan. 2011).

<sup>125</sup> For a condensed view of an article and user comment’s core elements see Table 37 in the appendix.

analysed. The total word count for the 1,750 comments adds up to 146,574 words that were produced by users. Out of the total word count, 13,762 words were quoted material. The quotes consist of text passages that a person wanted to refer to in their own comment. The quotes consist either of parts of other users' comments or article section that a commentator wanted to refer to. As illustrated in Table 7 commentators on *Express Online* use the quoting technique most frequently accounting for 20% of all the text that commentators produced. This circumstance also partly explains the highest word count total and average per user comment for *Express Online* out of all the five newspapers. *Guardian Online* follows with 11% while quoting appears not to be a common practice on any of the other three news sites.

Additionally, the data set of 1,750 comments was extended to answer two sub-research questions of my analysis. Following the analysis of different sequential strategies in impolite conflictive exchanges in 1,750 comments, an in-depth analysis was done beyond the 50 comments boundary in three out of the five newspapers (*Guardian Online*, *Mail Online*, *Sun Online*). The aim was to understand whether impolite conflicts that had started at a point in time during the first 50 comments of the discussion thread continued beyond that cut-off mark. I therefore included all the comments that each of the 7 articles in my data set had produced during the collection period. Table 8 includes an overview of the total number of comments that the 7 articles per newspaper had attracted. The 7 articles of the up-market news site *Guardian Online* attracted a total of 3,991 comments, the mid-market news site *Mail Online* discussion threads account for 4,250 comments across 7 articles. Last is *Sun Online* whose articles produced the least number of comments with 946 contributions. The number of comments per discussion thread varies. The length of the discussion threads on *Guardian Online* varied between 1,068 and 363 comments per article. On *Mail Online* threads attracted between 917 and 454 comments per article. Threads on *Sun Online* varied between 354 and 88 contributions for the least commented article. In sum, 9,187 comments were analysed for sequential discourse strategies in impolite conflictive exchanges. An extended data set was also used to get a user profile of the number of unique contributors that had produced the comments in my data set across the various newspapers (see section 4.5.1). Therefore, I added the discussion threads of another 5 articles per newspaper (again 50 comments per thread). These articles were also among the most discussed during the collection period. Table 9 gives an



overview of the corpus. In total, 12 articles and 600 comments per news site were checked for an identification of the individual contributor for each comment.

**Table 8.** The extended data set for the sequential discourse dynamics in impolite conflictive exchanges

Newspaper	Market segment	Articles n=	Comments n=	Ø comments per article n=
<i>Guardian Online</i>	up	7	3,991	570
<i>Mail Online</i>	mid	7	4,250	607
<i>Sun Online</i>	down	7	946	135
<b>Total</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>9,187</b>	<b>n.a.</b>

**Table 9.** The extended data set for unique user identification across the news sites

Newspaper	Market segment	Articles n=	Comments per thread n=	Total comments n=
<i>Guardian Online</i>	up	12	50	600
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	up	12	50	600
<i>Express Online</i>	mid	12	50	600
<i>Mail Online</i>	mid	12	50	600
<i>Sun Online</i>	down	12	50	600
<b>Total</b>	<b>n.a.</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>n.a.</b>	<b>3,000</b>

The articles topics (7 per newspaper, 35 in total) which triggered the most productive discussion threads across the news sites in the core data set of 1,750 comments are summarized in Table 10. The topic of the article was analysed to answer the research question whether certain potentially controversial topics were prone to an increased level of impolite behaviour.

**Table 10.** Topic split per newspaper

Newspaper	Politics	Society & Religion	Celebrities	Economics	Environment	Sports	Odd
<i>Guardian Online</i>	3	3	-	-	1	-	-
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	2	1	1	2	1	-	-
<i>Express Online</i>	2	2	-	2	1	-	-
<i>Mail Online</i>	2	2	3	-	-	-	-
<i>Sun Online</i>	1	1	1	-	-	3	1
<b>Total n=</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>

For example, out of the 7 most commented articles on *Guardian Online*, 6 articles related to political as well as social and religious topics. These were also the two topics that were the most commented across the news sites with 10 and 9 articles overall. The only article in the odd category was published on *Sun Online* and discussed the discovery of a mystery beast next to a lake in a South American town.

The 7 most commented articles on *Mail Online* and *Sun Online* were located in the various news topic categories of the sites. *Guardian Online* articles, *Telegraph Online*

and *Express Online* articles were all situated in the comment sections of the newspapers (the section are called “Comment is free”, “Comment” and “Have your say” respectively). Articles from *Guardian Online* and *Telegraph Online* were typical opinion pieces (except for 1 general news article on *Guardian Online*) whereas articles on the other three news sites were soft and hard news reports.

Table 11 summarizes a number of technical key characteristics of the reader response function across the five news sites in this study.

**Table 11.** Key characteristics of the reader response function across news sites

Newspaper	Pre-/post moderation	Characters per comment	Report abuse function	All articles open for comment
<i>Guardian Online</i>	mostly post	5,000	yes	no
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	mostly post	no limit	yes	no
<i>Express Online</i>	only post	no limit	yes	no
<i>Mail Online</i>	mostly post	1,000	yes	no
<i>Sun Online</i>	only post	2,000	yes	no

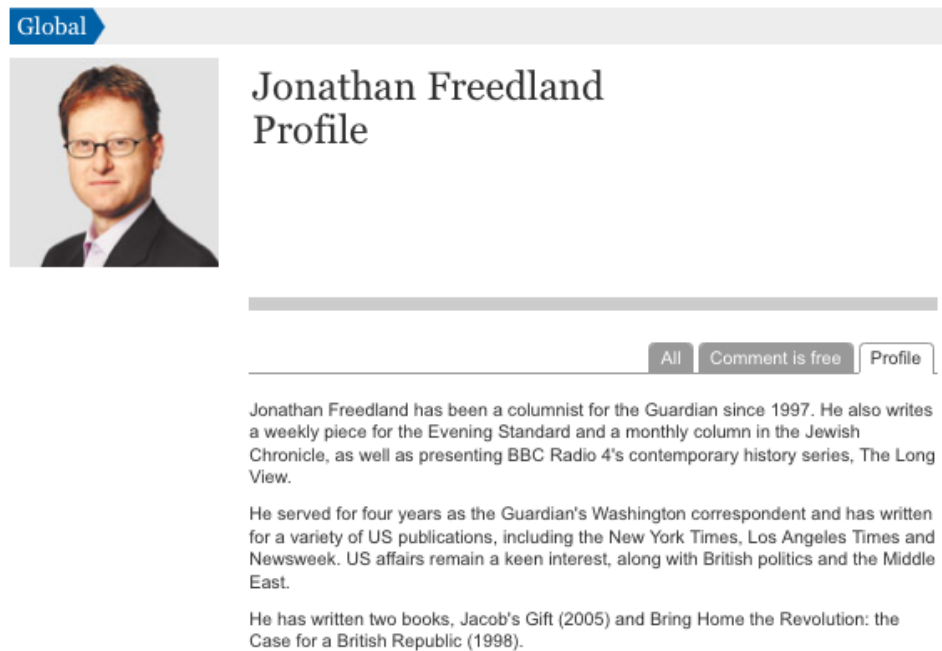
At the time of data collection in September 2009, the following rules applied for the various newspapers in terms of moderation policies: *Guardian Online* post-moderated the majority of the discussion threads. In some exceptions comments were pre-moderated and flagged as such for users. The same policy applied for *Telegraph Online* and *Mail Online*. *Express Online* and *Sun Online* only post-moderated user comments. *Guardian Online* is the only newspaper that had a special case of pre-moderation in place for users who had repeatedly shown negative behaviour. In such cases, *Guardian Online* filtered all comments of these users and submitted them to pre-moderation. The reader responses in my data set were all post-moderated.

At the time of data collection *Express Online* and *Telegraph Online* also did not put a limit on the number of characters per post. The other three newspapers had a limit in place as illustrated in Table 11. Also, on all news sites the option to report abusive comments was in place for all users. All of these features may have an influence on the language use of the commentators. Finally, all newspapers had restrictions on the choice of articles which were open for comments.

The commentators in my data set all use (pseudo)anonymous user names. In contrast, more is known about the journalists who had produced the discussed articles. On *Mail Online* and *Sun Online* the name of the author is indicated next to the article. On *Guardian Online* and *Telegraph Online* a more detailed profile of each journalist is available including their present role at the newspaper, their previous professional

background or general interests (see Figure 34). A picture of the author completes the profile. The only exception is *Express Online*. The selected articles in the data set from the “Have your say” section of the newspaper do not indicate the name of the journalist.

**Figure 34.** Journalist profile on *Guardian Online*<sup>126</sup>



To differentiate between the online and print editions of the newspapers in this study following labels are used:

Online editions	Print (offline) editions
<i>Express Online</i>	<i>Daily Express</i>
<i>Guardian Online</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>
<i>Mail Online</i>	<i>Daily Mail</i>
<i>Sun Online</i>	<i>The Sun</i>
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>

References to examples from the corpus of online reader responses are indicated by the respective item ID as registered in the XML database (see also section 4.1.1). The database was used for the storage and tagging of the corpus in this study. The first element of the item ID refers to the respective online newspaper from which the comment was collected (e.g. *Telegraph Online*) and the date it was published online

<sup>126</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global/2008/apr/22/jonathan.freedland> (accessed Jan. 10, 2011).

(day, month, year). The second element contains an abbreviated title of the article the reader responses are linked to (e.g. “Brussels\_is\_a\_shining\_symbol” for the full title “Brussels is a shining symbol of where the real power lies”). The last element refers to the chronological publication sequence of the reader response. The numerical code 0001 signifies that this was the first reader response which appeared at the bottom of an article. Correspondingly, the numerical code 0016 signifies that this was the sixteenth published comment in sequence. Here are two examples for the item IDs of data entries: *Telegraph Online*, September 07, 2009, “Brussels\_is\_a\_shining\_symbol\_0001” and *Sun Online*, September 07, 2009, “Bilic\_keep\_it\_shut\_0016”. As a final note, whenever I refer to an example from my data set, I have reproduced all the misspellings, multiple spaces and punctuation as well as the use of capital letters contained in the original reader responses.

#### 4.1.1. *The XML coding scheme and the database*

For the empirical data corpus a project-specific XML database was created in order to store the reader responses.<sup>127</sup> To tag and analyse the data I designed a tailored XML coding scheme. I decided to use an XML editor for my data because of its multi-functionality and the option to create complex search string queries (XPath, XQuery) to retrieve and extract tagged elements from the database. Quantitative as well as qualitative text chunk queries are possible. One of the main advantages for a researcher to store data in an XML format is the fact that it allows great flexibility in the ways to investigate the data. A researcher does not need to stick to prefabricated template tags but can create any specific tags to suit the unique needs of a study. Also during the process of tagging, new tags can easily be added to the XML schema if needed. On top, while the tags can be designed for an individual project, the data is widely accessible by any software that can read XML. Thus, this compatibility allows researchers to easily reuse and share their data for new studies (cf. also Bateman 2008:255). In addition, XML provides tools to ensure “document validation” during the process of tagging (Bateman 2008:255). In other words, researchers can easily check whether their data contains any formal and structural tagging errors (e.g. misspelled or omitted tags).

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<sup>127</sup> XML is the abbreviation for Extensible Markup Language. I used the EditiX XML Editor to create my database and the XML coding scheme. The basic XML editor from EditiX is freely available from [www.editix.com/download.html](http://www.editix.com/download.html) (accessed July 16, 2009).

Before the data could be fed into the XML database, I first had to collect my data in a machine-readable format. Here researchers meet their first challenge: Internet data is subject to constant change. In the case of online newspapers, articles are regularly updated; user comments are added or deleted (i.e. moderated). Thus, for research purposes the chosen articles and associated reader responses needed to be “frozen in time”. To do so they were captured via a screenshot function in Zotero.<sup>128</sup> The Zotero screenshot function is useful because it allows users to capture entire web pages and, in many cases, also embedded pages (e.g. *Sun Online*). After this initial step, the text units of the articles and the reader responses were copy-pasted, item per item, chronologically from the screenshots into the XML database and double-checked for mistakes with regard to the text recognition. Sometimes individual font characters were not recognized during the copy-paste process. These were then corrected manually in the XML database. I did not include pictures, videos, or user icons. Since the XML editor does not display bold or italic styles, I used tags to indicate these font characteristics in the database. For each reader response following meta-data was collected and indicated with tags in the database: the source the comment was collected from (i.e. the respective newspaper), the news category (as indicated by the newspaper), the URL, the contributor’s pseudonym, the date of publication and the date of data collection. Where retrievable, also the user’s location was indicated. For the articles that had triggered these user comments, the same type of meta-data was collected. In regard to the author, the name of the journalist was logged when available. For articles that did not include a journalist’s name the tag <na> was used.

For the analysis of my data, each reader response was tagged for the following elements (see Table 36 in the appendix for an example of a tagged reader response):

1. Sequential discourse dynamics (i.e. offending event, counter attack etc.)
2. Types of personal attacks
3. Swearing
4. Name-calling
5. Quotes: i.e. text chunks from other respondents that a commentator integrated in a contribution to contextualize her/his comments.
6. Bold and italic styles

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<sup>128</sup> Zotero is a reference-management system.

#### 4.1.2. *Advantages and limitations of the data set*

The Internet offers easy access to a rich pool of naturally occurring linguistic data. In the case of online newspapers, researchers can thus collect enormous amounts of machine-readable data in a very short time.<sup>129</sup> Thanks to the newspapers' online archives of their web content, researchers can also go back in time to analyse "older" material. For example, the *Guardian Online* offers free access to the "Comment is free" archive dating back to January 2006.<sup>130</sup> The newspaper also offers free access to digitalized letters to the editor<sup>131</sup> dating back to January 1999.<sup>132</sup>

While data can thus be easily collected, the naturalness of the material is also a major advantage. In the case of reader responses, researchers are not constrained by the observer's paradox in the interpretation of their data. Commentators produce reader responses and interact with other users on these platforms with the awareness that a large, public, anonymous audience potentially reads their comments. The researcher is just one member of this large anonymous crowd and does not influence the genuine production and interaction process of commentators (see also section 4.1.3 below on ethical considerations in regard to this form of data collection).

Limitations are found in the nature of the Internet and more specifically in the characteristics of online reader responses as well. The fluidity and non-transparency of the web leaves researchers with data that may or may not have been edited beforehand. Researchers thus have to accept the fact that it is often near to impossible to assess in how far the data of their choice has been edited (Jucker 2005:13–14). News content online is by default modifiable and thus has lost the "permanence and fixity" (Jucker 2003:144) which researchers could once rely on in the study of news

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<sup>129</sup> Admittedly, this enormous amount of available information may also turn out to be a disadvantage if researchers do not think carefully about sensible and well-balanced selection criteria for web corpus data.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/jan/27/thameswhale.uk> (accessed Jan. 21, 2011).

<sup>131</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/tone/letters> (accessed Jan. 20, 2011).

<sup>132</sup> I am referring to any freely available archived web content on the news media site itself. This may also include material from the print editions, which newspapers also offer as part of their online content. Of course, such digitalized archives have existed before for print copies in the pre-Internet days. In the case of *The Guardian* their print material dates back to 1821. However, researchers no longer need a newspaper's service to get access to such data. They can directly collect the kind of data that he or she is interested in. Also, data from these print editions is often not available free of charge whereas web content can be collected for free.

language. While news platforms tend to provide the publication history of an article (see Figure 35), it is not always easily traceable which parts of an article exactly have been changed. Also hot news stories may be updated by the minute (see example in Figure 36), making it a time-intensive task for a researcher to keep track of the various updated versions of articles in their corpus.

**Figure 35.** *Guardian Online*: “Article history” to add transparency to ever-changing web content

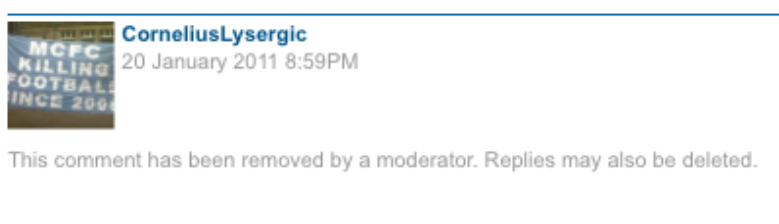


**Figure 36.** *Guardian Online*: News items are updated by the minute



With reader responses, data collection becomes even more complex. Comments are continuously being added on news sites. After all, the access to the news source is 24 hours and contributors from across the globe can potentially post their comments. Simultaneously, moderators scan the site and delete responses and replies to such comments on an ongoing basis. It is not feasible for a researcher to figure out how often and how many responses in a discussion thread were deleted. There are newspapers including *Guardian Online* which do flag reader responses that have been deleted by the moderator, but that is by no means a common practice on all news sites (see Figure 37).

**Figure 37.** *Guardian Online*: Deleted user response



For the present study where the focus is on conflictive forms of communication in these community areas, one needs to accept the fact that due to moderation policies there may be “missing” (i.e. deleted) data in the conversation structure of these discussion threads. In turn, this circumstance affects the generalisations which can be drawn from the data. The most extreme forms of aggressive communicative behaviour of users may not be captured, and if one does, then just by “luck” (meaning that one was faster than the moderators in catching the comment). However, there are three options for researchers to nevertheless find traces of data modifications in a data set: Moderators indicate their actions on the site or commentators complain about having had their contributions deleted. A third possibility is the investigation of comments of other users that include quoted fragments of already deleted comments. Nevertheless, these are challenges that all researchers interested in this form of communication have to face. The important point here is that researchers need to realize that what one has collected may not present the full linguistic spectrum that one would like to investigate.

Since this study deals with graphically written data, one also needs to work around the non-presence of prosodic features which would otherwise be very helpful indicators in spoken data for the interpretation of potentially impolite content. Culpeper (2005:51) rightly argues that until recently studies have “over-emphasize[d]



lexical and grammatical resources” and have not paid enough attention to prosody. While, I am aware of the importance and added value of prosody for a better understanding of impoliteness, my data is by default not predestined for this dimension of analysis. Nonetheless, user comments do include elements of conceptual orality (Landert & Jucker 2011). As such, we also find a set of features that commentators arguably use to mimic non-verbal cues (e.g. emoticons to imitate facial expressions,<sup>133</sup> capitalization to imitate loud voice quality). Researchers can consult these features in the evaluation of the data.

Finally, researchers in CMC have to battle a rather complex technical problem. Because newspapers run their platforms via different content management programmes, researchers need different tools to capture and store Internet data. Zotero snapshot and XML databases are a good solution if one is mainly interested in the written communication of users.

#### *4.1.3. Ethical considerations on data collection in CMC*

While it is definitely an advantage that the observer’s paradox is not of concern in data such as online user comments, ethical questions in regard to research and data collection in CMC have materialized. Here privacy issues of users and the necessity for requests of authorization of these individuals are most discussed (Eysenbach & Till 2001:1103). In the present study, I had to ask myself the following questions: Is it ethically correct to collect data from users in reader response sections without their informed consent? Since I did not send out requests for authorization to users, is this type of data collection not just a revival of surreptitious recordings that have already been questioned for a very long time in many branches of academic research? Despite the fact that in many cases it would not even be possible to get in touch with commentators directly – personal information such as e-mail addresses are protected by the privacy laws of the newspapers – I do think that it is ethically justifiable to use such a method of data gathering for online user comments. I draw here upon Herring (1996b) and Eysenbach & Till (2001), who provide very sensible guidelines that

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<sup>133</sup> It should be noted that though emoticons are often assumed to mirror facial expressions, this is frequently not the case. Interlocutors use emoticons to communicate the pragmatic implicature of a message. As Dresner & Herring (2010:250) convincingly argue, there are many uses of emoticons in written CMC where “the primary function of the smiley and its brethren is not to convey emotion but rather pragmatic meaning, and thus this function needs to be understood in linguistic, rather than extralinguistic, terms.”

researchers should consider for ethically responsible research in CMC. The authors (Eysenbach & Till 2001; Herring 1996b:165–166) argue that one needs to clearly distinguish between two kinds of data on the web. There is data that is publicly accessible by any person on the web and there is data which is non-public; that is a researcher could only obtain such data as a registered member of a closed and non-public community. While it may not always be completely clear whether such a clear distinction can be made in all cases, they argue that such public data is generally safe to use without obtaining consent from users (cf. similar to traditional print newspaper content). Reader responses are clearly located in an unrestricted public space of these online news sites and are accessible by a mass audience. An example for a clear-cut case of a non-public community where a written consent would be vital according to Eysenbach & Till (2001:1105) is a small and closed group of sexual abuse victims whose desire is to share their problems with others. Here special care is necessary not only because the access is non-public, but also the topics discussed can be considered very private. Eysenbach & Till (2001:1105) add that also the dimension of “vulnerability” and “potential harm” should be considered in such an online community. The more vulnerable participants are, the more obliged a researcher is to obtain informed consent from individuals. This also helps to prevent researchers from inflicting even further harm upon users through unauthorized publication of intimate personal details. In contrast, it is safe to say that while user comments on news sites can contain private topics, the bulk of discussions are aimed at non-private topics. Even if users share private experiences, I argue that commentators do so in the full awareness of a mass readership and with the desire to “seek public visibility” (Eysenbach & Till 2001:1104) with their personal experiences. Commentators are also made conscious of this public arena and possible (legal) consequences when they register with a newspaper. For example the *Daily Mail* community guidelines state the following:

This is a public forum. Once your comment is online, everyone with Internet access can read it. [...] Don't forget that you are legally responsible for what you submit. Please consider how your comment could be received by others. Many different types of people of different ages may view your comment.

The *Daily Express* guidelines even include suggestions for users what not to include in their comments to protect their own privacy:

Once you have created a MyEXPRESS account, whatever you publish can be seen by anyone viewing the Daily Express website. Whilst this means you can let other people know your opinions, get in touch with existing friends and also make new ones, you are also allowing others to see information about yourself. We therefore strongly suggest you read the following safety tips: Don't divulge personal information. Never give out your email, home address or phone number, or post information that would make it easy for someone you didn't know to find you.

According to the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) (2002:5) users' conscious registration to online communities and thus their official consent that their actions are subject to public exposure is a further advantage for researchers as backup. In my case, commentators have to agree to these community terms of usage on all five news sites in this study before they are able to even submit their first comment. They are thus made aware that their comments/actions may be read and observed by a large audience that is not known to them personally. Herring (1996b:166) concludes that users need to show responsibility for their own actions in such a public space. She continues that it is thus reasonable for a researcher, in contrast to non-publicly accessible interactions, to use such material without asking for authorization of the respective person:

Public interaction is repeatable for any reasonable and nonmalicious purpose (with citations of the source where credit for ideas is due), but private interaction should not be repeated outside the group without explicit permission from the sources involved.

This also echoes the guidelines set up by the AoIR (2002:5):

[...] the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc.

Though user comments are thus safe to use without informed consent according to the arguments mentioned above, one last concern needs attention: the protection of the anonymity of users. While researchers can protect the anonymity of users by refraining from using pseudonyms associated to verbatim quotes<sup>134</sup> in publications (Eysenbach & Till 2001:1105), the counter-argument here relates to the fact that a researcher also has an obligation to respect intellectual property rights of people in public online settings. Eysenbach & Till (2001:1105) note: "In some cases,

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<sup>134</sup> The argument put forward by Eysenbach & Till (2001:1105) is that nowadays, search engines are so advanced that it has become an easy task to trace users even if researchers have removed personal information. One simply types verbatim quotes into the search field and chances are high that the original source is located without much effort.

participants may not seek anonymity, but publicity, so that use of postings without attribution may not be appropriate.“ In the case of user comments it seems appropriate to attribute quoted material to the respective pseudonyms. This is actually also a common practice applied by newspapers themselves. They select (pseudo)anonymous users’ “private voices” (Landert 2011) from the comment sections to integrate them in their own news reports.

In conclusion, the guidelines above are helpful for a respectful and sensible treatment of user data. However, in the end it also depends on the moral judgement of a researcher to decide which data is fit for publication and which is not.

## **4.2. Introduction: The analysis dimensions**

In this introductory section, I am going to give a brief overview of the different dimensions of analysis applied to the data. In the consecutive sections, each sub-study will be introduced and discussed in detail including the respective methodological approach and the analytical categories with illustrative examples. Each section concludes with a discussion of the qualitative and/or quantitative results. For a condensed view of the different levels of analysis see also Table 38 in the appendix.

In section 4.3 the participation framework and communicative situation in reader responses will be discussed. For this purpose an advanced mass communication model will be presented and the interactants’ discursive roles and constellations will be explained.

In sections 4.4 to 4.4.6 the focus will be on the sequential discourse dynamics of impolite conflictive exchanges in reader responses. Mainly inspired by Bousfield’s (2008a) methodological approach, the evolution of confrontational impolite encounters from the beginning to the end stage will be explored. The emphasis will be on the different types of defensive and offensive reactions following a first face threatening insult as well as strategies to end an impolite conflictive encounter. Communicators’ face threatening offences are captured with the concept of personal attacks, which will be discussed in detail in section 4.6. The analysis in this section wants to underline the importance of studying impoliteness not only at a local level (i.e. in its immediate context) but also understanding the phenomenon within the global discoursal structure of reader response discussions.

Sections 4.5 and 4.5.1 follow up on the analysis in sections 4.4 to 4.4.6 and look at the reactive-interactive patterns of these conflictive impolite exchanges. While the

different kind of discursial moves were emphasised in the previous section, here the overall length (i.e. duration) of the individual conflictive exchanges is treated. The analysis will show that despite the dialogic technical setup of reader responses, they can be situated along a reactive-interactive continuum of interaction.

Sections 4.6 to 4.6.13 form the centre piece of the analysis. Here the 12 different types of personal attacks which were used in conflictive exchanges are explored in detail. The methodological approach builds on Walton's (1998) concept of *ad hominem* attacks and is complemented by a number of strategies that emerged during the bottom-up analysis of the data. This part of the analysis concludes with an in-depth case study of discussion threads on *Express Online* which are noticeable in terms of a high frequency of personal attacks and the small but very active number of users on the site (section 4.6.14). Especially one user who stands out for his/her recurrent negative communicative behaviour will be discussed and compared to the behaviour of a flamer.

The analysis sections 4.7 to 4.8.1 then are an investigation of two linguistic features that have often been discussed in the literature from an impoliteness perspective, namely swearing and name-calling. While it is argued that no linguistic feature can be treated as inherently impolite by default, it is explored how the use of these two features can potentially reinforce evaluations of impoliteness in the context of personal attacks and the situational setting of reader responses. Section 4.8.2 concludes the analysis with a case study on *Sun Online* where a British celebrity becomes the target of insults by commentators. While the analysis in the previous sections focused on offences against journalists or co-commentators here it is demonstrated that also individuals who are discussed in articles can become the victim of such destructive attacks.

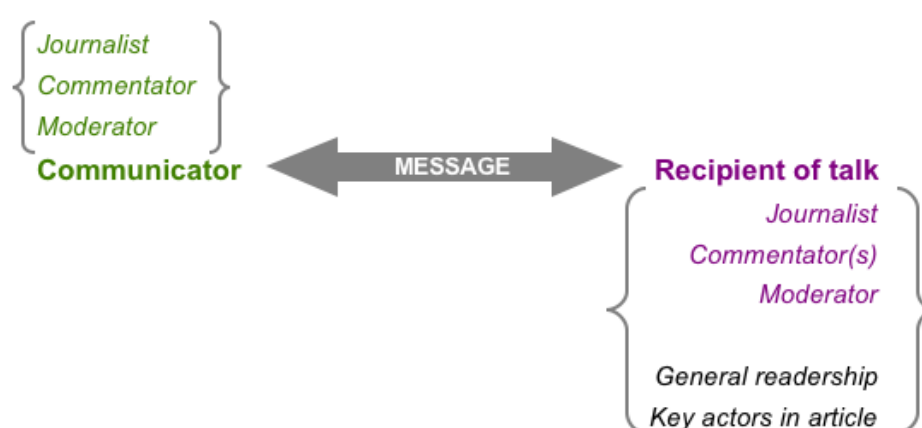
### **4.3. The participation framework and communicative situation in reader responses: Interactants' discursive roles and constellations**

Using Burger's (2005:3–19) traditional scheme for mass media communication as a starting point, I am going to postulate an advanced model to describe the complex participation framework and communicative situation found in reader responses. Reader responses are a specific type of mass media communication, but traditional models, such as Burger's conceptualisation, are not able to account for the dynamics

in regard to participants' interchangeable discursual roles and communicative possibilities we find in this newer online form of mass media communication.

Burger makes a basic distinction between communicators [=“Kommunikator”], i.e. the sender of a message (2005:3–5) and the recipient [=“Rezipient”] i.e. the receiver of this message (2005:5–10). By applying these two basic roles to an online setting, a much more complex set of discursual roles emerges. In reader response sections, we can identify three groups of communicators (see Figure 38): First of all there is the journalist and then also the individual commentators and members of the moderation team of a newspaper who can operate as communicator. In their role as article producers, journalists initiate debates in reader response sections and subsequently have the option to interact with commentators by posting responses to user contributions. Commentators act as communicators through their individually posted contributions. Members of the moderation team, who scan the pages for inappropriate comments, can also act as communicators. Behind the scene, they can directly contact commentators who do not behave in line with the community standards. Or, they can act as “silent” communicators by means of “non-verbal” communicative acts. By deleting an inappropriate comment of an offender, moderators make it very clear to the respective commentators that the individual's behaviour is not appropriate according to the community standards of the site.

**Figure 38.** The reader response participation framework with interchangeable discursual roles



Next to the three groups of communicators in reader response sections, there are five different types of recipients of talk to be noted (see Figure 38). These are the previously mentioned group of journalists, commentator(s), the moderators and two additional groups, namely, the general readership and key actors in the article.

Members of the readership passively absorb the commentators' contributions. Nevertheless, members of the readership always have the option at any point in time to become active communicators by posting contributions. I will return to this point in the following paragraphs. Key actors, the final group of recipients of talk, are people that are discussed in detail in an article. They have a unique position in reader responses since they are not part of the immediate communicative situation, and therefore, key actors are very unlikely to read or even respond to these comments. Despite their absence as communicative partners in this setting, my data set reveals that users address key actors directly. For example, *Sun Online* published an article featuring the Croatian football trainer Slaven Bilic,<sup>135</sup> who tries to shatter claims that one of his players, Eduardo, has been cheating during a game against an English soccer team. Despite the fact that it is almost certain that Bilic will not read the reader responses, user "MUFC2199" addresses him directly as illustrated in example (20):

(20) Bilicic ,take another look you moron ,Eduardo is a diver simple as ..

(*Sun Online*, September 09, 2009, "Bilic\_keep\_it\_shut\_0048")

The fact that the journalists, commentators and moderators can act as communicators and as recipients of talk illustrates the innovativeness of the communicative situation in reader response sections compared to traditional mass media communication. This new set of interchangeable discursual roles during the same interaction<sup>136</sup> contrasts with the traditional one-way communication common to older forms of news media communication. Arguably, audience involvement was already known and practiced in traditional news media communication. However, such involvement was limited and strongly constrained by the media editors and producers (e.g. radio phone-ins, letters to the editor) (cf. also section 2.4). Back in the pre-online days of news print editions, radio and TV programmes, the journalist acted as the prime communicator of a news message and the members of the readership acted as the prime recipients of these messages. The interchangeable communicative roles in online reader responses clearly illustrate a trend that established boundaries have blurred (for a more detailed discussion see also section 2.3).

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<sup>135</sup> Cf. <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/sport/football/article2624322.ece> (accessed Sep. 09, 2009).

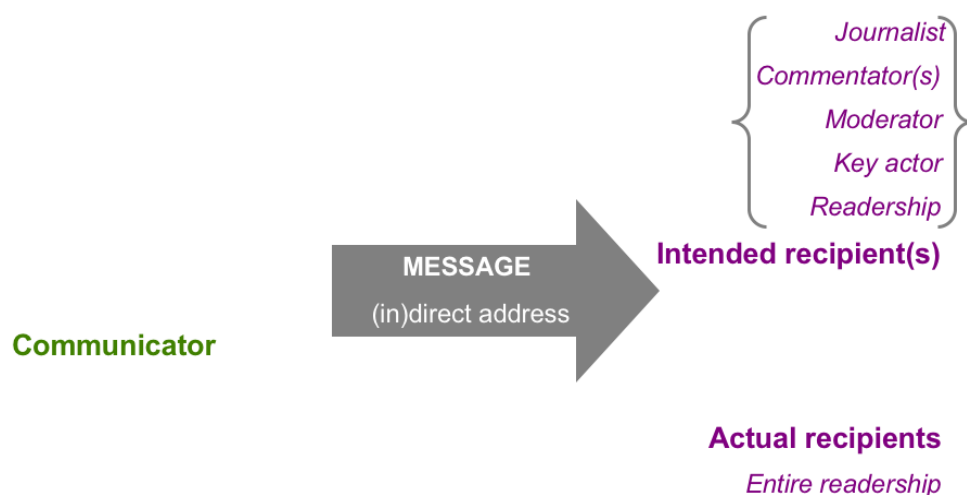
<sup>136</sup> Factoring in that such interactions take place in an asynchronous medium, one interaction is specified as the chain of user contributions associated with one article.

Building on Burger's (2005:8) idea of a traditional mass media recipient scheme, a more fine-grained division is needed for the recipients, i.e. the receivers of messages in reader response sections. Especially, when investigating conflictive exchanges in reader responses, it is crucial to understand the different recipient roles present in this setting. Such an understanding helps us to pinpoint those participants who may feel offended during a debate and explain who may feel a need to react in a personal dispute. This is also in line with Bell (1996:92), who argues that it is fundamental to understand the different roles members of the audience play to properly grasp the meaning of numerous utterances from a linguistic perspective:

The linguistic form of many utterances can only be explained or decoded on the basis of analysis of the roles which the audience to that utterance are playing [...]. There are real complexities possible in everyday interaction over whom utterances are addressed to, the influence of other parties who hear those utterances, utterances which are addressed to one person but manifestly targeted at someone else, and the like.

Burger suggests the following two key groups of recipients in traditional mass media communication: the intended recipients ["intendierte Rezipienten"] and the actual recipients ["effektive Rezipienten"]. In Bell's conceptualisation those could roughly be compared to the participants "whom utterances are addressed to" and the group of other participants "who hear those utterances". In the following, I will first introduce the group of intended recipients with illustrative examples. According to Burger, intended recipients can be defined as those interactants that a communicator wants to purposely target with a message. Based on the complexity of the communicative situation in reader response sections, five groups of intended recipients can be identified (see Figure 39).

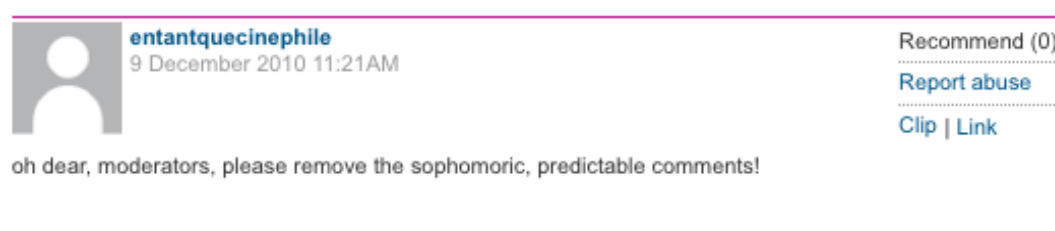
**Figure 39.** Intended and actual recipients in reader responses



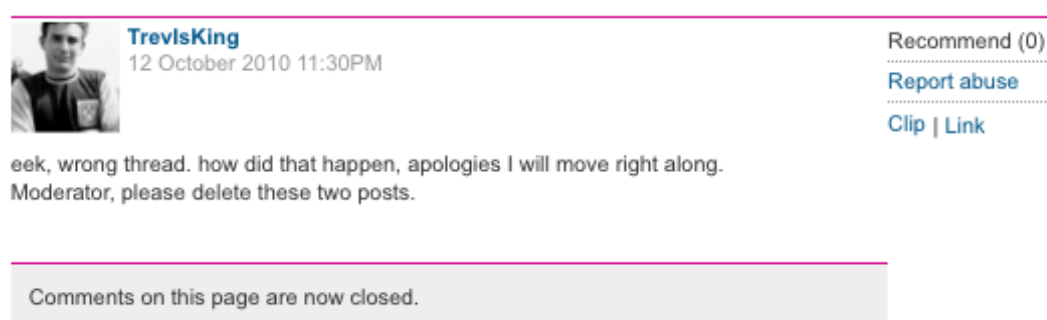


A reader response can be intended for a journalist, another commentator/specific group of commentators, key actors in the article, the moderators or, at the most general level, at the overall readership of the respective news site. While the journalists, co-commentators and key actors may be the most frequently intended recipients, netiquette moderators are also addressed from time to time, despite the fact that they usually operate behind the scene. Often, users request moderators to delete inappropriate or misplaced comments as is illustrated in Figure 40 and Figure 41 taken from *Guardian Online*:

**Figure 40.** Interaction between a commentator and a moderator<sup>137</sup>



**Figure 41.** Interaction between a commentator and a moderator<sup>138</sup>



The strategy of collectively addressing a group of previous commentators who share the same point of view is frequently found in reader responses as illustrated in example (21) from a *Mail Online* discussion thread where commentators discuss the ethics of showing the visual image of a dying soldier in the media. User “Lisa” appears to be very upset about the practice of displaying such images in the news and addresses those commentators in the discussion thread who had previously announced that they were in favour of such measures.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/dec/08/scratch-and-sniff-smell-cinema> (accessed Dec. 9, 2010).

<sup>138</sup> Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/musicblog/2010/oct/11/solomon-burke-gone-never-forgotten> (accessed Oct. 12, 2010).

(21) It is disrespectful to show a picture of a person dying. His father requested the picture not be shown. For those of you who say that this picture makes death real, what planet are you living on??? Death is ALWAYS real and you don't need a picture to prove that.  
DISRESPECTFUL!!

(Mail Online, September 09, 2009, "The\_image\_0044")

User "Lisa" directly addresses the other commentators to accuse them of an irrational line of argumentation. Here, I would like to introduce a further distinction in regard to the direct and indirect address of an intended recipient (see Figure 39). This is also of relevance for the study of impoliteness and conflictive exchanges in reader responses. In reader response sections, a communicator does not only have the option to address an intended recipient directly but this can also be done indirectly by talking about the intended recipient with a third party. In her study on the speech act of accusation in face-to-face encounters, Günthner (2000:76) notes such a division. She explains that a communicator may reproach an intended recipient of an accusation by talking about the individual with somebody else in earshot. She (Günthner 2000: 76) illustrates this point with two acquaintances who have a conversation in the fruit section of a supermarket (example (22); see my translation in example (23)). Customer "A" calls out loudly to her friend "Eli":

(22) A: ELI willsch du au von dene Traube.  
Eli: ja gern. pack mir auch ein Kilo ein.  
A: ja wenn DIE:: welche UBRIGLASSET.  
DIE DATSCHEN alle an mit ihre Finger.  
so: was U:NAPPETITLICHES.

Translation:

(23) A: ELI would you also like some of these grapes.  
Eli: yes thanks. Get me one kilo, too.  
A: yes if THESE:: people here would LEAVE SOME.  
THEY TOUCH them all with their fingers.  
really U:NSAVORY.

Here customer A addresses her friend Eli directly but indirectly she intends to address the target of her accusation within hearing range i.e. the customers who touched the fruits. In reader response sections the very same communicative constellation is possible. In example (24) from *Express Online* the user "Welsh\_Dragon" addresses the general readership to complain about the behaviour of four other commentators on the news site called "Hookit58" and "kingdom", "wannabeamp" and "hip\_hopper":

(24) \*\*\*\*\*WARNING\*\*\*\*\*  
 02.09.09, 6:47pm  
 Hookit58 and kingdom are one and the same. Argue with either and they run crying to the moderators demanding your account be suspended. No doubt this account too will be suspended the moment either of these pathetic creepsrealises it is here. The libellous comments and obsessive behaviour of these two underhand, and lying individualshave made membership of this forum highly unpleasant.  
 [...] I therefore advise you all to totally ignore hookit58, kingdom, wannabeamp and hiphopper as they are demonstrably evil and obsessive and should you cross them you too will find yourselves the victims of their abusive hate campaigns and scurrilous false allegations.

(Express Online, September 09, 2009, "Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0002")

User "Welsh\_Dragon" uses a number of negative references (e.g. *these pathetic creeps* and *these two underhand and lying individuals*) and negative assertions (e.g. *the libellous comments and obsessive behaviour; they are demonstrably evil and obsessive, their abusive hate campaigns and scurrilous false allegations*), which are clearly aimed at the targets of her/his accusations. However, "Welsh\_Dragon" chooses to address the general audience rather than addressing the individuals in question directly. Naturally, in CMC the individuals are not physically within earshot. However, since the accused participants could always happen to read the comment posted by "Welsh\_Dragon", I argue that this constellation is similar to the conversational exchange between the two women in the fruit section of the grocery store.

To conclude the discussion on the concept of intended recipients, it should be mentioned that it is also characteristic of reader responses to include multiple different intended recipients in one contribution. Example (25) illustrates that user "ZOTZ" intends to address a specific co-commentator, a group of commentators and the journalist in a single contribution.

(25) VoltaireRules [previous commentator] good post. The US didn't steal Iraqi oil. Whenever I question the assumption that the US invaded Iraq for the oil the leftists here [previous other commentators] never want to discuss facts. Al-Zaidi [journalist] is the same. He perpetuates a myth that there was no sectarianism before the US invaded. If that is so why did the Basra Shiites rebel in 1991?

(Guardian Online, September 19, 2009, "Why\_I\_threw\_0039")

The multiplicity of recipients in one contribution may of course be linked to the asynchronous nature of the technical setting in reader responses. Instead of addressing them in three individual posts that may appear at different times, the user economizes by merging them into one contribution.

Having elaborated on the range of intended recipients in reader response section, I will now turn to the second group of participants in mass media communication mentioned by Burger (2005:8), namely, the “actual recipients”. Burger refers to all those participants as actual recipients who a message is not intended for but who by chance are present at the speech event. Given that reader responses are situated in the public community areas of online news media sites, I argue that all members of the newspaper readership could theoretically read those comments. Therefore, we can refer to all of them as actual recipients (see Figure 39). Continuing this thought, any commentator in reader response sections is theoretically<sup>139</sup> aware of the fact that she/he is not only dealing with intended recipients but at all times also with actual recipients. That these actual recipients are fully accepted members of the audience and not simply eavesdroppers or overhearers can be sustained with O’Keeffe’s (2006:3) comparison of media conversations on the radio and TV with everyday interactions in public spaces:

When a presenter and an interviewee or guest interact on television or radio, they do so with the knowledge not only that that they are being overheard, but also that they are having a conversation in front of an audience. In this way there are having a different kind of conversation than two people talking on the train besides others who cannot avoid hearing their conversation.

She thus differentiates between media interactions which are conversations that “take place in front of a hearing audience” in contrast to public everyday conversations which “take place beside an overhearing audience” (O’Keeffe 2006:3). Building on Goffman’s participation framework, O’Keeffe (2006:19) concludes that by default it is the aim of media institutions to broadcast, and therefore, audience members of TV and radio programmes can, according to her, at no time be overhearers but are in any case “official and ratified hearers even if they are not fully watching/listening.” Thus, reader responses may not be read by all members of the newspaper, but since these

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<sup>139</sup> A tentative “theoretically” is appropriate here since users sitting behind their computers are physically and temporarily distant from the “place” of the speech event. Thus, they may forget about the potential number of people that could read their comments.

reader responses are meant to be “broadcasted” to a public audience, all readers of the online news site are fully accepted members.

A slightly older, though similar and important framework was articulated by Bell (1996:91) for traditional mass media communication. Bell developed his circular mass media model by contrasting the communicative situation with a basic face-to-face communication model. According to Bell there are four main recipients in the audience that a sender of a message may be faced with in a face-to-face communication:

1. the “addressee” who is “known, ratified and addressed”,
2. the “auditor” who is “known and ratified but not addressed”,
3. the “overhearers” whose presence is recognized but who are not “ratified” participants,
4. the “eavesdroppers” who are neither known to be present nor are they “ratified” participants at a speech event.

Applying this framework to traditional mass media communication Bell argues that the concept of knowing your addressee is impossible. Mass media communicators rather work with the idea of addressing an imagined but nonetheless unknown “target audience”. For example, social and economic parameters of readers (cf. Jucker 1992) as well as gender or distribution reach of a print newspaper may be criteria that help mass media communicators to get a clearer picture of their target audience. Bell (1996:92–93) suggests the following categories:

1. the target audience who is “envisaged” rather than known and addressed,
2. the auditors who are unknown, not addressed, but “expected”,
3. the overhearers who are unknown and also not “expected”,
4. the eavesdroppers who are not supposed to be members of the audience.

However, Bell (1996:94) also acknowledges that it is indeed difficult to differentiate between a “ratified auditor” and an “unratified overhearer” in any form of mass media communication. In such a case he suggests to think about it in terms of “degrees of envisaged audience membership.” Audience participants that we would not expect to be part of the envisaged audience could then either be defined as unratified overhearers or even eavesdroppers. Nevertheless, especially thinking of TV communication, Bell (1996:91) admits that in the end such a distinction is not feasible since the easy access to mass media communication gives researchers a hard time arguing that there should be a participant who is not a ratified member of the

audience. This circumstance is especially true for online news media where access is practically global. The only limiting factors to access may be language (e.g. English versus less frequently spoken languages) and economic reasons (less access points e.g. in certain geographical regions) as well as political regimes who control online content. To conclude, I argue that though the general mass readership of reader responses cannot really be known by the communicators nor do communicators always intend to address the entire audience, they, nevertheless, are ratified participants. To continue Bell's line of thinking, I would like to call members of the actual recipients a special type of auditors.

It is crucial to understand the role of the actual ratified recipients in conflictive exchanges since they may also feel offended despite the fact that they are not the intended recipients of a personally offensive message. In other words, while a commentator may intend to offend one specific other interlocutor, she/he may also offend other participants incidentally through her/his inappropriate behaviour or actual participants may feel the need to counter in someone's stead following a personal attack. Examples (26) and (27) are taken from a debate that was triggered by the article "The relics and bones that bring us closer to god" written by Christopher Howse and published on the *Telegraph Online*. In example (26), user "pewkatchoo" utters her/his displeasure with the fact that Mr. Howse, after apparently being absent for some time, has started to publish articles again on *Telegraph Online*:

(26) Aaaaaaaaarrrrrrghhhhhhhhhh. He's back!

(*Telegraph Online*, September 17, 2009, "The\_Relics\_and\_Bones\_0001")

Despite the fact, that the journalist is the intended recipient of this personal attack, a member of the actual recipients who has not been in any way targeted by "pewkatchoo" feels the need to react to defend the face of the journalist. As illustrated in example (27), "Andrew Shakespeare" counter attacks "pewkatchoo" by criticizing her/his negative behaviour towards the journalist:

(27) Pewkatchoo, if Christopher Howse's columns are so intolerable to you, don't read 'em. Why is it these days that nobody can make a respectful comment on Christianity without attracting a chorus of patronising sneers? What happened to respectful disagreement?

(*Telegraph Online*, September 17, 2009, "The\_Relics\_and\_Bones\_0013")

This phenomenon is not only found online but has already been described in a similar form by Günthner (2000:76–77) in her study of accusations. Günthner notes that it is characteristic of the speech act of accusations that the person who accuses another person of a certain kind of misbehaviour towards others does not always need to be the victim of the accuser's actions. Günthner argues that accusations can also be uttered in defence of a third person that may or may not be present at a speech event. Günthner describes the scene titled "Birthday party at Peter's home". The invited guests are sitting around a table and Peter is busy laying the table but forgets to put a cup down for Jutta. Eva, who is sitting next to Jutta, answers in her stead and points out the mistake to Peter as illustrated in example (28):

(28) Why didn't you bring a cup for Jutta?"  
 [= warum HÖ:SCH=en de Jutta koi Tass BRÖ:CHT?]

Similar to the commentator "Andrew Shakespeare" on *Telegraph Online*, who felt the need to respond in defence of the journalist, Eva did the same for Jutta in a face-to-face conversation. Interestingly, the physical detachment and relative anonymity among participants in an online setting does not appear to affect such third-party defence behaviour.

Returning to the fact that reader responses are accessible to a large number and heterogeneous group of readers, it is possible that a commentator's contribution may not only be offensive to intended recipients but may be incidentally offensive to the general readership of these comment sections (i.e. the actual participants). *Guardian Online* hints at this complexity in their community participation standards in which they discuss the danger of possible misunderstandings among participants:

Be aware that you may be misunderstood, so try to be clear about what you are saying, and expect that people may understand your contribution differently than you intended. Remember that text isn't always a great medium for conversation: tone of voice (sarcasm, humour and so on) doesn't always come across when using words on a screen. You can help to keep the guardian.co.uk community areas open to all viewpoints by maintaining a reasonable tone, even in unreasonable circumstances.

Also *Mail Online* highlights that participants need to consider the heterogeneity of the audience, which may, even if not intended, lead to misunderstandings and conflict:<sup>140</sup>

Once your comment is online, everyone with Internet access can read it. Please make your comment clear to ensure that it is not misunderstood. Your comment may be rated by other

<sup>140</sup> Cf. [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/house\\_rules.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/house_rules.html) (accessed June 20, 2011).

users and categorised e.g. best and worst rated. You can express a strong opinion but please do not go over the top. Don't forget that you are legally responsible for what you submit. Please consider how your comment could be received by others. Many different types of people of different ages may view your comment.

While reader responses are a relatively new form of mass media communication, the challenge of dealing with intended and actual recipients is not a completely new development in mass media communication. In traditional forms such as TV, radio or print interviews, communicators also need to deal with different groups of audience segments: the ones intentionally targeted and others who happen to be also interested for whatever reasons.

This phenomenon does not only apply to the producer's side but also to the interviewee's perspective. The interviewee needs to pay attention to her/his way of interaction with the interviewer, but she/he also needs to keep the wider audience in mind who will watch/read the interview responses. Bell (1996:97–98) illustrates the complexity of the recipient situation based on an interview situation with former US President Jimmy Carter where things went wrong. In the 1970s President Carter was interviewed by a *Playboy* magazine journalist. At the end of the interview, he could not resist to share some of his thoughts on the topic of “lustfulness”. Carter did that contrary to his usual way of answering interview questions. These last few remarks caused uproar in sections of the audience who thought his behaviour inappropriate. Thus, Bell argues, despite the fact that his behaviour may have been appropriate in relation to his interview partner and probably to the core audience of this magazine, Carter, in his role as a political leader, incidentally offended other members of the actual audience with his comments.

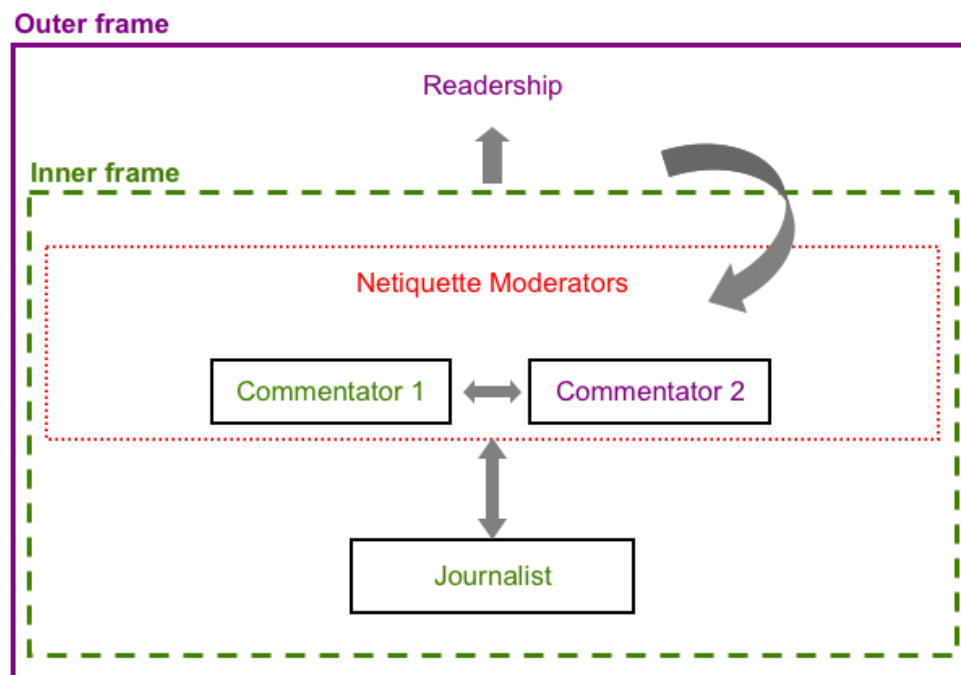
To visualize the overall communicative situation in reader responses, the idea of an inner and outer circle in mass media communication is useful. Burger (2005:19–23) developed this circle model for traditional mass media communication. With a number of adaptations, the two circles also help us to describe the situation online (cf. Figure 42).

In, what I would like to call the inner frame, the journalist can interact reciprocally with the commentators. The commentators are free to interact reciprocally with each other. Behind the scene, netiquette moderators operate in most cases as invisible communicators. In the outer frame, the entire readership is located. They act as passive recipients of the reader responses. However, as is illustrated in Figure 42 the



lines of the inner frame are dashed because members of the passively absorbing readership always have the option to post their own comments and thus take an active role in the inner frame before retreating back to the outer frame. While the inner and the outer frame would have been much more clearly distinguished in the traditional print and TV news, reader response communication shows that formerly fixed borders between the passive audience and active communicators in the news media are no longer stable and have started to blur.

**Figure 42.** The outer and inner communicative frames in reader responses



#### 4.4. The sequential discourse dynamics and strategies in conflictive exchanges

Impoliteness does not exist in a vacuum and it does not in normal circumstances just spring from ‘out of the blue’. The contexts in which impoliteness appears and is utilised strategically must have been previously invoked, that is, with all other things being equal, the interactant who utters impoliteness must have felt sufficiently provoked at some point prior to actually delivering the impoliteness. (Bousfield 2008a:183)

Since conflictive behaviour does not evolve in isolation i.e. without a trigger, nor can impolite behaviour be interpreted successfully or scientifically convincingly without embedding it in its wider discursal context, in this section I am going to look at the sequential discourse dynamics of impolite conflictive exchanges in reader responses. This discursal approach allows me to explore and classify the type of reactions “uttered” in response to a personal attack. Furthermore, it enables me to look at the

overall interactive structure, i.e. the length of such conflictive sequences in reader responses from the start to the end. In other words, once a personal attack has been formulated to target another participant in reader response sections, I can investigate not only the specific ranges of reactions but also the number of discursal “moves” taken by the attacker and her/his opponents in the progression of such a conflictive exchange.

In my methodological approach I have been mainly inspired by Bousfield’s (2008a) work to investigate my data. Bousfield applied his method to the analysis of impolite discourse in a number of British television “docusoaps” which featured confrontational encounters in a number of real-life situations. The TV programmes centred around the following activity types: Encounters between public authorities and citizens who committed some form of offence (*The Clampers*, *Parking Wars*, *Motorway Life*, *Raw Blues*) as well as encounters between members of the military (*Soldiers to be*, *Redcaps*) and the everyday life in a London restaurant kitchen (*Boiling Point*). Obviously, there are considerable differences in the type of data used for the two studies. Nevertheless, Bousfield’s model proves adaptable to the specific situation of reader responses. This said, a number of differences regarding the nature of the data sets need to be kept in mind. While Bousfield dealt with videotaped spoken face-to-face encounters, I deal with medially written contributions in a (pseudo)anonymous computer-mediated environment. To a certain extent my data obviously lacks the additional dimension of intonation patterns and non-verbal bodily signs to aid the interpretation of utterances. Bodily expressions of aggression such as shouting, physically attacking each other or “giving someone the finger” are obviously restricted to face-to-face encounters. However, such signs are not completely absent in reader responses because we have a number of compensation strategies that users utilize in this medially written form of CMC. For example, capitalization for stress (*YOUR FULL OF B/S*<sup>141</sup>), paralinguistic modifiers (*LOL*<sup>142</sup>, *LMFAO*<sup>143</sup>), multiple exclamation or question marks and repetitive letters or words

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<sup>141</sup> Example taken from *Express Online*, September 09, 2009, “Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0042”.

<sup>142</sup> Example taken from *Guardian Online*, September 19, 2009, “Why\_I\_threw\_0032”.

<sup>143</sup> *LOL* = “laughing out loud”; *LMFAO* = “laughing my fucking ass off”. Example taken from *Sun Online*, September 07, 2009, “Bilic\_keep\_it\_shut\_0008”.

(*jeeeeeeeees r u really that stupid*<sup>144</sup>) are used to express emotional intonation and non-verbal behaviour. Also, while Bousfield applied his method to spoken data and my data is graphically written, reader responses show elements of spoken discourse, and the technology used on online reader response sites is designed for dialogic exchanges. Thus, users have the option to react to an offence at any point in time. Bearing this circumstance in mind, we need to consider the factor of asynchrony that is not present in Bousfield's data (i.e. he uses synchronous data). Since comments are posted chronologically and users may not always be online to check whether another participant has already reacted, conflictive exchange may be less spontaneous and in turn this may also influence the kind of reactions one can expect in a CMC environment. Finally, the level of anonymity and physical detachment among participants differs in the two data sets. Participants in Bousfield's data set are physically close (i.e. face-to-face) during the conflictive exchanges while in my data set participants are completely detached through technological means. On top, while participants in Bousfield's data set may not always know each other personally (for example, he analyses interactions among police staff and traffic offenders), participants in reader response sections, most likely, have never met in person and may often only know another users' pseudonym. The factors of asynchrony, anonymity and physical detachment could also reduce the likelihood of a counter-response since users may feel less obliged or less concerned to react to an offence against their person. Arguably, in face-to-face conversations, offensive verbal attacks may set up stronger expectations for some kind of reaction in the addressee. Keeping these differences in mind for the interpretation of my data, Bousfield's categories to describe the different stages and strategies during a conflictive impolite exchange are flexible enough to be adapted to reader response data. Where necessary, the methodology was modified to address the specific needs of the computer-mediated data here studied.

Bousfield's framework (2008a) to describe the dynamics of conflictive impolite discourse is divided into four main sequential discourse levels. According to Bousfield, the evolution of a conflictive impolite exchange can basically be described and assigned to these levels. The four planes are the "offending event" (= trigger), the "start", the "middle" and the "end" of a conflict. Associated with each level are a


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<sup>144</sup> Example taken from *Sun Online*, September 17, 2009, "Mystery\_beast\_0048".

number of discursial moves that a communication participant may use during a confrontational encounter. Table 12 provides an overview of the sequential discourse strategies that were identified in my data of 1,750 reader responses. The spectrum ranges from very characteristic to less typical strategies, which are used during conflictive impolite exchanges in the interactions here studied. Conflicts were traced that evolved among commentators, or commentators and newspaper representatives (journalists/moderators). After a conflict is triggered and the first face threat is communicated, participants can first of all decide whether they want to respond at all or whether they want to remain silent. In my data set, communicators' face threatening offences are captured with the concept of a personal attack. In other words, any offence registered in my data set will be some type of face threatening personal attack on the person (cf. sections 4.6.1 to 4.6.12 on the various subtypes of personal attacks identified).

**Table 12.** Sequential discourse strategies in an impolite conflict

Trigger	Start	Middle	End
Offending event	1st personal attack(s)	<b>DO NOT RESPOND</b>	
		<b>DEFENSIVE RESPONSE</b> ignore accept	withdrawal compromise 3rd party intervention
		<b>OFFENSIVE RESPONSE</b> counter attack	



If participants choose to respond after they were personally attacked, they have the option to do so in a defensive or an offensive mode (middle level). In the reader responses studied here, participants either chose an offensive counter attack or they reacted completely defensively by either ignoring their opponent or by accepting responsibility for a face attack. The three strategies to end a conflict in reader responses were 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention, compromises or a withdrawal from the communicative situation. In the following I will introduce and discuss each level and the respective discursial strategies as displayed in Table 12 in detail and support them with examples from my data set. Where applicable I will also relate back to strategies that were mentioned by Bousfield (2008a) but did not occur in my data (e.g. submission to the opponent), or strategies that occurred but where modifications had

to be considered in the categorization of the data due to the nature of reader responses (e.g. do not respond strategy, 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention).

Conflictive exchanges may thus be successfully described by means of these strategies, but it is not guaranteed that an offensive trigger automatically results in a conflictive exchange. Naturally, conflictive exchanges can but do not need to display elements of all four planes. It may well be the case that a verbal battle is triggered but does not get resolved in the end. For example, a discussion partner may not want to get entangled in a conflictive exchange and thus ignores the “offending event” to prevent a further escalation. Likewise, a participant may not ignore the offence but simply refuse to respond when requested.

#### 4.4.1. *The conflict trigger and first offending personal attack*

The prerequisite to any conflictive exchange is the fact that there needs to be some kind of “offending event” (Jay 1992, as cited in Bousfield 2008a:187). Such an “offending event” or “offending situation” thus acts as a “trigger” to provoke a conflictive impolite exchange to ensue. Bousfield (2008:183; 187) argues that any event (be it a certain behaviour, language, personal traits of a person) related to the face of the interlocutor may act as trigger for hostile impolite verbal reactions:

In effect what causes the onset of impolite containing utterances by a particular interlocutor is virtually any (at least, perceived) aggressive, antecedent, event (intentional or otherwise) which offends, threatens or otherwise damages the face of the interlocutor.

Bousfield (2008a:184) gives example (29) from his data set of the docusoap *Soldiers to be* to illustrate the concept. A sergeant is busy to do drills with a new group of recruits. After one of the recruits is not able to execute the drills correctly, the sergeant approaches the soldier and shouts:

(29) Hey. Are you on a fucking Sunday outing are you ...eh?

Here, the unsatisfactory behaviour of the recruit serves as an “offending event” for the sergeant to utter a negative and arguably offensive response. Let me illustrate the occurrence of a similar situation in my own data set. Example (30) is taken from *Telegraph Online* and serves as an illustration of an “offending event” followed by an impolite reaction. After not having published commentaries on *Telegraph Online* for an unknown period of time, columnist Christopher Howse is back with an article on “The relics and bones that bring us closer to god”. Following his article, the very first to respond is user “pewkatchoo” with the impolite response:

(30) Aaaaaaaarrrrrrghhhhhhhhhh. He's back!

(*Telegraph Online*, September 17, 2009, "The\_Relics\_and\_Bones\_0001")

Clearly, here Howse's person and arguably his views expressed in the article appear to have been sufficient to serve as an accidental offence to the face of the commentator and triggered her/his hostile response. The commentator's emphatic exclamation *Aaaaaaaarrrrrrghhhhhhhhhh* shows the commentator's expressive annoyance or discontent with the journalist to the extent that she/he probably would like to scream as indicated in the deviant spelling of *argh*. The exclamation *He is back!* has a different function. On the surface level this exclamation underlines what is obvious to all regular and alert readers of Howse's articles on *Telegraph Online* but implies that it is the journalist's very presence which annoys the commentator. The surface statement *He is back!* may as well be interpreted as an implied criticism that Howse is back talking about the same things as he did in his previous articles. It is not uncommon in my data set that journalists receive offensive responses because of these very same reasons (person, views expressed) as illustrated in the Howse's example above.

Importantly, I would like to stress that while this category is undoubtedly crucial for any study of conflictive exchanges, my data set revealed that it is by no means always possible for a researcher as an outside observer to trace the exact events which may have served as a trigger for impolite utterances to follow. Also Bousfield (2008a:187) admits that offending events should not be viewed as independent components but as a result of a conglomerate of components. Hints for the identification of offending events may indeed often only be possible through the participants' explicit meta-discourse as illustrated in the example (31) from *Sun Online*.

(31) Agree with Ossiel23, there are some really uneducated comments on here full of sarcasm and irony. Look at the facts before you engage your excuse for a brain....

(*Sun Online*, September 09, 2009, "Joy\_as\_kop\_fan\_0022")

Here the user "mrwoods10" comments on a couple of previous contributors and the manner how they shared their views on the release of a lawfully proven innocent football fan from prison. Michael Shields, a Liverpool supporter, had been cleared of allegedly killing a waiter after attending a football match of his club in Bulgaria.

Despite the final legal verdict, this group of commentators persist that Shields has been involved in the murder and should therefore never have been released from prison. The user “mrwoods10” appears to be explicitly offended by the circumstance that commentators, in his view, did not show enough sophistication in their arguments and especially points to the fact that he/she is not in favour of their extensive use of *sarcasm and irony*. The users’ verbal output serves as a trigger for him to launch an impolite personal attack on his co-commentators: *Look at the facts before you engage your excuse for a brain....* which implies that she/he is offended by people that make claims about things which are proven to be factually wrong.

The quoting technique (Angouri & Tseliga 2010:61–62; Bublitz & Hoffmann 2011; Herring 2001:619–620; 2007) is often used by commentators in reader response discourse to refer to specific text parts of co-commentators’ previous contributions. This method is another useful strategy to locate “offending events” in my data. By copying other commentators’ text elements to one’s own message, users contextualize their response in the ongoing discussion thread. It is also an efficient method to directly react to desired passages of importance without having to spend time on paraphrasing other people’s words. Example (32) is taken from a discussion thread in response to an article titled “Smokers are now New York’s most discriminated minority” published on *Guardian Online*. Alexander Chancellor, the author of the article, reports on Mayor Bloomberg, who was in the news in September 2009 because he considered banning smoking in publicly owned outside spaces in the city of New York. Commentator “Auric” does not comment on the topic of the article itself but feels offended by the author’s apparent lack of competence in the correct use of the English language. “Auric” quotes the headline of the article to exemplify his/her reasons for being offended (Glosses in-between arrows are mine e.g. <quote>).

(32) <quote>Smokers are now New York’s most discriminated minority</quote>  
 Even by the Graun’s standards, awful English and clearly not written by  
 an educated foreigner, but a dim-witted native speaker. How would you  
 use that verb? ‘I am discriminated’ etc. FFS

(*Guardian Online*, September 18, 2009, “Smokers\_0016”)

Apparently, the author’s language use and indirectly the *Guardian*’s editorial quality control of their journalists’ output served as a trigger for “Auric” to respond with an impolite response. The hint at Graun’s standard most probably refers to the anagram

*The Grauniad* which was introduced by the magazine *Private Eye*<sup>145</sup> following *The Guardian's* frequent failure to filter out spelling mistakes in its own newspaper (including the spelling of its own name) (Davies 2008:171; Dalzell & Victor 2008:303). She/he thus implies that even though one has to expect mistakes on *Guardian Online*, this author's item is beyond the acceptable level of inaccuracies that she/he as a reader should have to expect in any article on *Guardian Online*. The user underlines her/his consternation with emotionally charged language including name-calling the journalist, labelling him a *dim-witted native speaker*, and the exclamatory use of swearing expressions (*FFS*<sup>146</sup>). The juxtaposition between a *dim-witted native speaker* and *an educated foreigner* implies that even a non-native speaker would have been capable of avoiding such a mistake since they would have learned that *discriminated* cannot be used in this context without adding the preposition *against*. "Auric" also uses challenging and condescending rhetorical questions (*How would you use that verb? 'I am discriminated'*) to further ridicule the author of the article. The quoting technique was useful in this interaction to locate the main trigger of the "offending situation" which resulted in the commentator's impolite reaction.<sup>147</sup>

As mentioned above, once an "offending event" or "offending situation" has taken place, it is possible that a communicator will be triggered into uttering a first impolite personal attack to target an immediate communicative participant including the journalist, a commentator/groups of commentators or members of the netiquette moderation. Commentators may however also feel sufficiently provoked by the behaviour or actions of key actors described in an article to launch a personal attack on these remote participants. I would like to call them "remote victims" because key actors are not participants in the immediate communicative situation and are therefore very unlikely to engage in a conflictive exchange.

For practical coding reasons, I divert here from Bousfield, who considers the first impolite reaction already as a form of response to the offending event. In my view

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<sup>145</sup> Cf. <http://www.private-eye.co.uk> (accessed 23 June, 2011).

<sup>146</sup> *FFS* = 'for fuck's sake'

<sup>147</sup> Additional example for an offending event in quotes: User "mufc009": "evilmonkey84 – <quote>ignore him and beat England on Wednesday</quote> LMFAO! And that's coming from someone who supports an ENGLISH team! Typical GOONER!" (*Sun Online*, September 07, 2009, "Bilic\_keep\_it\_shut\_0008").



however, the trigger serves as a means to set the scene that may result in a conflictive exchange but does not necessarily have to result in a conflictive exchange. In other words, a trigger is a given prerequisite for any conflictive exchange to evolve. Since I am also interested in the length of such conflictive sequences and it is not always methodologically and systematically possible to trace the offending event (or sum of offending events) in a discussion thread, I consider the first face threatening personal attack as the starting point of any conflictive sequence (see Table 12). Notwithstanding, any response that includes further personal attacks may also be viewed as trigger for consecutive personally offensive responses (cf. Bousfield 2008a:187). This allows for more consistency in counting sequence lengths across the discussion threads. Thus, once the first personal attack has been committed (start level), we enter the next stage in conflictive discourse. Now the attacked person has two options, namely, to respond or not to respond (cf. also Bousfield 2008a:188).

#### *4.4.2. Do not respond: Silence*

I will first discuss the situation where participants do not respond after an initial attack. Bousfield (2008a:188) admits that researchers have a hard time analysing any occurrences of silence in interactions due to the fact that there are numerous reasons why people use this strategy in face-to-face conversations. However, due to the anonymity and physical distance among participants in my data set, this strategy proves an even greater challenge for the interpretation of interactions in discussion threads. According to Bousfield (2008a:188–189) participants in any conflictive exchange may decide to use the strategy of staying silent for one of the following reasons (there may be others): Firstly, participants may stay silent as a defensive strategy to save their own face or they may not react to demonstrate their active refusal to answer in a situation where other participants would expect the person to reply. However, it may also be an indication that a participant has accepted a face threat. Following Bousfield (2008a:188–189), other reasons could be that the attacked person may have simply missed an utterance acoustically or may not decode an intended face threat in an utterance. In such cases, silence does not have a strategic purpose despite the fact that it may be interpreted as such by conversation partners. Finally, Bousfield (2008a:188) explains that silence may be the only viable option if one is taken by surprise and “lost for words” after an attack or has simply nothing to so say in response. Similar reasons are also mentioned by Verschueren (1985) (see

also Kurzon 1995:57) in his study of silence. He suggests that a person may simply not be capable of answering due the emotional impact (positive or negative) of a situation or another interlocutor on the individual.

While it is thus a challenge for researchers to reach a correct or at least contextually sensible interpretation of “marked” intentional silence in any form of interaction, the matter becomes even more problematic in online reader responses. In a CMC environment where physically distant users interact with each other, users can simply disappear after having submitted a comment to a discussion thread. In such a case, silence may have no strategic purpose at all. However, it is impossible to judge whether this person simply did not comment any more because there was nothing more to add, whether the person used silence indeed strategically to accept a face threat or whether the person used silence as a successful defence strategy to save their own face. Some users may simply think it is not worth to bother engaging in an argument with a complete stranger who is not confronting them face-to-face but sitting behind a computer at some unknown location. Due to the high number of different participants in such discussion threads and the fact that comments appear asynchronously, users may also not always be online to check other participants’ contributions or they may simply miss a comment that was directed at their person in the wealth of contributions in a discussion thread. This may be especially true for journalists who simply do not have the time to read and react to all comments posted in response to their articles. Also, journalists who are in most cases known figures may not want to lose their poise in public and thus stay silent in an argument to protect their positive reputation as a professional journalist. While interviews with participants after data collection may be a viable option for many researchers to obtain “insider” knowledge and interpret occurrences of silences in their data successfully, this is also not an option for participants in my data set. Due to privacy regulations, private contact details of users are in most cases only available to the owners of these discussion platforms, the newspaper publishers. Exceptions are people that provide a contact e-mail address in their user profiles but such information is by far not systematically available for all users. Finally, the body language of interlocutors in face-to-face communication often helps researchers to interpret silence as intentional or unintentional. As stated above, due to the technical characteristics of my data, my analysis cannot rely on such features. In summary, the investigation of unintentional and intentional silence is subject to so much speculation

in my data that I am going limit myself to just one form of on record silence which is more easily traceable in reader responses: the strategy of ignoring the attacker.

#### *4.4.3. Defensive response: An overview of possible strategies*

Before I discuss the strategy of ignoring the attacker in detail, let me first refer back to the basic dyadic response scheme that this strategy is part of. As explained, once an offending event has caused a person to utter a face threatening act, the offended addressee has two options to react to such an act: to respond, or not to respond. The latter has been discussed in detail in the previous section. In terms of response options, the addressee can counter in an offensive or defensive manner (see Table 12). In other words, a participant can counter primarily offensively with another face attack or she/he can choose to counter primarily defensively to save her/his own face. Alternatively, participants can use a range of offensive and defensive strategies at the same time.

The response strategy of ignoring an offender is one of seven defence strategies identified by Bousfield (2008a:193–203) in his data set:

- 1.) ignore,
- 2.) accept a face attack,
- 3.) “opt out” of a communicative exchange,
- 4.) downplay the impact of a face damage,
- 5.) “offer an account” for one’s actions,
- 6.) switch roles to escape accountability for one’s action,
- 7.) “plead” to constrain further face damage.

In the following sections I will discuss the defensive strategies of ignoring (1.) and accepting a face attack (2.) in detail since the other defence strategies could not be identified in my data set. While there was only a limited range of defence strategies observed, there were also no new strategies identifiable in my data. Here I will also discuss the applicability of Bousfield’s categories to my data. For a detailed explanation of the whole range of strategies with illustrative real-life examples see Bousfield (2008a). The limited set of defensive response strategies used in my data reveals that the realization of the different strategies appear to be heavily context-depend. Power dynamics (interlocutors with equal vs. unequal power), social and professional roles (e.g. superior vs. subordinate) and activity type (army training vs.

reader responses debate) may be most determining here in regard to the repertoire of defence response strategies.

#### 4.4.3.1. *Defensive response: Ignore your discussion partner*

Bousfield (2008a:197–198) describes two types of the defensive strategy “ignore the face attack”. On the one hand, interactants may use this strategy in situations where another interactant wants to “let off steam” with a face attack. According to Bousfield this strategy is common in army trainings. Recruits ignore the face threats by senior staff to get through “dressing down” situations without causing further friction. The second type of “ignoring” relates to more implicit face threats as found in sarcastic utterances. Here the interactant ignores the additional sarcastic and offensive meaning and just reacts to the literal content of an utterance.

There are two specific ways how users ignore other participants in my data. In the first case, a commentator reacts to an offender but does not comment on the face attack. Alternatively, in situations where an offender issues multiple types of face attacks at a participant, the addressee may respond to one of the attacks but ignore the others. Example (33) from *Express Online* is an illustration of the first strategy. The users “Hookit58” and “Welsh\_Dragon” are involved in an ongoing dispute about the deployment of British army troops in Afghanistan. In a previous comment (see the quote in example (33)) “Welsh\_Dragon” accuses “Hookit58” of double standards and cowardice. Thereupon, “Hookit58” counter attacks “Welsh\_Dragon” arguing that his views are disrespectful and closes his comment by belittling “Welsh\_Dragon” as *Little Big Man*.

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(33) THE CONTEMPT IT DESERVES 31.08.09, 4:09pm
      <quote>
      From Dragon HOOKIT DOESNT GIVE A DAM HOW MANY DIE — SO LONG AS HE’S NOT
      ONE OF THEM. WHEN THE SH*T HITS THE FAN HIS SORT ARE ALWAYS RIGHT AT THE
      BACK OUT OF HARMS WAY.
      </quote>
      I will treat this with the contempt it deserves. No more to be said.
      Regards Little Big Man
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(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009, “Is\_it\_time\_0019”)

Interestingly, “Welsh\_Dragon’s” addresses “Hookit58” in his/her next comment again but ignores “Hookit58’s” previous attack. “Welsh\_Dragon” takes up a completely different comment by “Hookit58” (see quote in example (34)) to respond

to as if she/he has lost interest in the previous dispute or indeed ignores the attack in defence of her/his own face.

(34) PIPE DREAM 31.08.09, 6:07pm

<quote>

All I want is to see world peace for everyone a world where we can travel around it freely without fear, is this a dream? Or in time will it be possible?

• Posted by: Hookit58

</quote>

YOU HAVE MORE CHANCE OF MEETING THE TOOTH FAIRY IN YOUR LOCAL TESCO'S. ANIMALS KILL FOR FOOD, FOR SELF PRESERVATION, FOR SELF DEFENCE, AND OCCASSIONALLY FOR THE RIGHT TO BREED. MANKIND KILLS FOR NEBULOUS REASONS SUCH AS RELIGION, POLITICAL DOGMA, IDEOLOGIES, AND PURE GREED. YOU WANT A WORLD WITHOUT WARS - THEN EXTERMINATE MANKIND AND YOU WILL HAVE ONE. I'VE KILLED, I'VE FOUGHT, I'VE SEEN DEATH CLOSE UP, AND BELIEVE ME IN BATTLE SELF PRESERVATION IS THE STRONGEST INSTINCT. AND TODAY I STILL HAVE NO FEELINGS FOR THE MEN I KILLED, NO SYMPATHY BECAUSE THEY WOULD HAVE KILLED ME HAD I GIVEN THEM THE CHANCE. BUT, I REFUSE TO KILL AN ANIMAL, ANY ANIMAL, EVEN FOR FOOD. ANIMALS ARE INNOCENT - MANKIND IS NOT.

I

(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009 "Is\_it\_time\_0031")

In the second and more frequent case, the attacked does not react to the offender at all but continues to comment on other topics or to converse with other participants. In these instances, the strategy of ignoring may be used as means to actively and explicitly deny the presence of the offender. In other words, the offended person indicates that it is not even worth her/his time to talk to the offender. Apart from that, there may also be cases where this strategy is used unintentionally. In other words, the targeted participant may have simply missed the comment of the offender in the wealth of all the other contributions.

Participants who are attacked but do not appear anymore as discussants in the subsequent discussion thread where previously associated with the strategy of "staying silent". However, one could also argue that in some cases, participants may also use this strategy to ignore an offender. In contrast to the previous type, "ignoring" the offender is then not done on "on record".

#### 4.4.3.2. *Defensive response: Accept the responsibility for a face attack*

The second defensive response strategy used by participants in my data is to accept the responsibility for a face attack (cf. Bousfield 2008a:193), for instance, in the form

of an apology or an agreement after having been criticized. While the linguistic realisation of the speech act of an apology may vary substantially across languages and speech communities according to Jucker & Taavitsainen (2008:242), they offer the following broad definition to describe the core characteristics of any apology: “It is an acknowledgement by the offender that another person was or may have been offended by an offence for which the offender takes direct or indirect responsibility, and at least implicitly promises forbearance”. Apologies are used for many different types of offences and also find wide application outside conflictive exchanges. For example, interlocutors may excuse themselves for sneezing, calling the addressee’s attention to something or apologize for declining an invitation (cf. a detailed overview in Deutschmann 2003:64; also in Jucker & Taavitsainen 2008:239). Nevertheless, this strategy is rare in my data set and thus does not appear to be characteristic of conflictive impolite exchanges in the discussion threads. This may have to do with medium factors and the overall communicative setting in my data. Through the anonymity and distance between communication partners, participants may not feel the need to take the responsibility for their negative communicative behaviour or they may not see the relational benefit of damaging their own face by accepting that they have been offensive in a conflict. With the notion of relational benefit I think along the lines of Locher & Watt’s (2008:96) conceptualisation of relational work in interaction. In their view, individuals engage in relational work in any form of social interaction: “Relational work refers to all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice.” Based on these ideas, I argue that apologies would be a useful tool to positively reinforce and reconcile existing relationships after a conflictive situation. Continuing this thought, it may well be the case in anonymous online interactions among users that the desire for the maintenance of interpersonal relationships is less strongly present. Also, through the anonymity online people may not experience power inequalities so strongly and therefore not feel the need to take a subordinate role by expressing explicit regret for their own behaviour. In conflictive face-to-face communications and especially in situations of unequal power, it may be socially advantageous for an offender to offer an apology. For example, a parking offender could think that an apology to the traffic warden after a dispute may help her/him construct a positive interpersonal relationship and may even result in not having to pay a fine for the transgression.

However, since my data includes only 2 occurrences of an acceptance of responsibility for a face attack in the form of an apology, I am not able to draw any substantial conclusions here. Neither were there any instances of acceptances of a face attack related to criticisms. Examples (35), (36) and (37) which include one of the two instances of an apology in my data, are an exchange sequence taken from a discussion thread on Christopher Howse's article "The relics and bones that bring us closer to God" on *Telegraph Online*. The article is discussed passionately between religious believers and atheistic opponents. One of the commentators called "amazonas" accuses the journalist of a lack of credibility. She/he says: *And these people wonder why they're not taken seriously.....* By using the label *these people* she disassociates herself/himself from the journalist and probably implies that the journalist is part of a group of people that cannot be taken seriously, for example, due to their inaccurate way of working. She/he argues that this is evident in Mr. Howse's apparent carelessness to check the validity of historical facts to support a logic line of argumentation. "amazonas" quotes a part of Howse's article and presents arguments that she thinks prove the weakness of his argument.

(35) <quote>  
 "Take Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, who had known the Apostle John, a close friend of Jesus. In AD155, he was executed."  
 </quote>  
 This would make him executed 123 years after the death of Jesus. So he must have been pretty old at the time if he was a 'close friend' of Jesus. Or maybe they only become friends after Jesus Returned from the dead...? Or maybe he was a 'close friend' in the way the happy-clappies are close friends of Jesus.  
 And these people wonder why they're not taken seriously....

(*Telegraph Online*, September 17, 2009, "The\_Relics\_and\_Bones\_0016")

Consequently, another user called "Ben" counter attacks "amazonas" to reveal that it is not the journalist who was wrong but that she/he should pay more attention to the actual content of the journalist's argument (see example (36)). A different reading of the sentence reveals that the journalist did not make any incorrect claims.

(36) amazonas: try to stretch your imagination enough to understand that 'Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, who had known the Apostle John, a close friend of Jesus', refers to John as being a close friend of Jesus, not the bishop of Smyrna.

(*Telegraph Online*, September 17, 2009, "The\_Relics\_and\_Bones\_0022")

Having realized her mistake, “amazonas” takes responsibility for her face attack on the journalist and utters an apology (see example (37)): *David G and Ben, you are right. I misread the article. I apologize.* “David G” is another commentator who criticised her for her thoughtless comment. Interestingly, while “amazonas” may have indirectly aimed her apology at the journalist, the excuse in this context is primarily an attempt to reconcile with “Ben” and “David G”. Since both commentators must have felt irritated enough by her contribution to react in defence of the journalist, she may have felt that her behaviour was not just insulting towards the journalist but was also inappropriate towards her co-commentators.

(37) David G and Ben, you are right. I misread the article. I apologize. I have no investment in being “right”, however I suggest still doing the math. The gap is 123 years. Even in Polycarp was executed as an old man he would have had to have befriended John when he was very young and John very old. It’s just about possible but barely especially given the life spans of the time. I guess we’ll just have to give these chapsthe benefit of the doubt, what with all the bones and that. Pax Vobiscum.

(*Telegraph Online*, September 17, 2009, “The\_Relics\_and\_Bones\_0026”)

In conclusion, example (37) is valuable for a qualitative analysis to give us a glimpse into the use and dynamics of apologies in this online form of communication. However, since there were only 2 occurrences of this strategy in the data, the acceptance of face attacks appears not to be part of the characteristic behaviour of users in reader response debates across the five newspapers investigated in this study. It may in fact also be argued that it is not even required or socially expected communicative behaviour in reader response communities.

#### 4.4.4. *Offensive response: Four types of counter attacks*

While Bousfield’s data (2008:193–194) revealed that defensive strategies, as discussed above, were used regularly to respond to an initial attack, offensive counter strategies did not occur frequently in his data. Interestingly, my data reveals a completely different picture. In my data set, frequently in cases of a response to an impolite attack, such a response includes an offensive face threatening counter attack. Bousfield (2008a:194) suggests that the low frequency of offensive strategies in his data set may be linked to the inequality of the interlocutors in terms of power and social standing. Therefore, it seems sensible to expect a higher amount of offensive counter strategies in reader responses since this is an activity type where power and



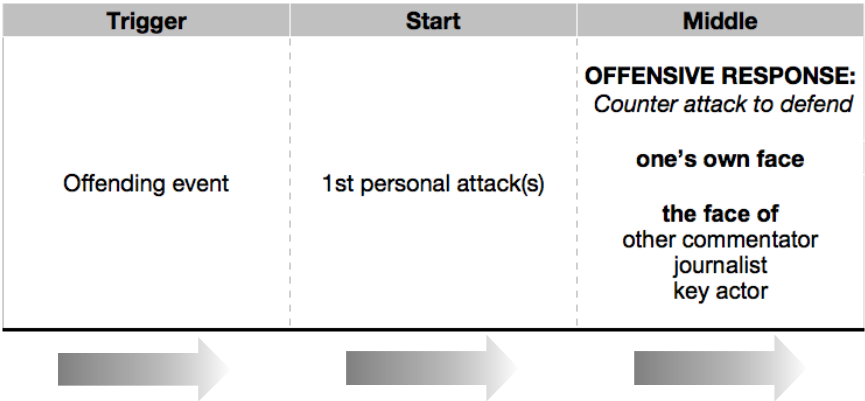
social relations are less prominently displayed or not even known among commentators. Nevertheless, although these counter attack strategies in my data set are primarily offensive face attacks towards other participants (i.e. personal attacks), they also always include a defensive element. In other words, while ignoring a participant and accepting responsibility for a face threat are fundamentally defensive, offensive counter attack strategies are triggered by the fact that one’s own face or the face of other participants in response sections needs to be defended. The fact that we do not only have counter attacks to save one’s own face but also numerous instances where commentators who are not personally attacked feel the need to defend the face of another participant by countering with another personal attack, can be attributed to the complexity of the communicative situation as described in section 4.3. Also, I argue that any face attack responding to an initial attack in reader responses can be seen as a form of face saving. It is hard to think of reasons why one would otherwise counter if there is not a need to defend one’s own or somebody else’s face. One exception indeed may be cases where users enjoy countering just for the sake of the argument.

Altogether, I identified the following four sub-types of offensive counter attacks in my data set. Though these strategies are primarily offensive personal attacks they also contain a defensive aspect. Participants use these offensive counter attacks in an attempt to also defend their own face or the face of another participant:

- 1.) Offensive counter attack to defend one’s own face
- 2.) Offensive counter attack to defend the face of another commentator
- 3.) Offensive counter attack to defend the face of journalist
- 4.) Offensive counter attack to defend the face of key actor in the article

Table 13 visualizes the sequential position of these strategies in the overall conflictive exchange.

**Table 13.** Offensive responses: Four types of counter attacks



In the following section, I will discuss the offensive strategies with examples from my data set. Attention will be especially paid to the interplay between the offensive nature of these personal attacks and the trigger for these attacks, namely, the need to defend one's own face or the face of another participant. The basic sub-types of offensive face threatening attacks (i.e. the different kinds of personal attacks), regardless of whose face is defended in such an attack, will be discussed in sections 4.6.1 to 4.6.12.

#### 4.4.4.1. *Offensive response: Counter attack to defend one's own face*

The most straightforward case is the first category in which an attacked interlocutor responds to an initial face threatening attack with an offensive counter attack defending her/his own face. Example (38) is taken from *Guardian Online*. Here "AlanC" responds to an initial attack by "BigYank76" (see quote at the beginning of his/her comment). BigYank76's face attack implies that "AlanC" has been very inconsiderate of her/his feelings. Thereupon "AlanC" responds with an offensive counter attack that is also meant to defend his/her own face. "AlanC" first defends his/her own face by claiming that it he/she had *no intention of hurting* "BigYank76's" feelings and justifies his/her reaction by claiming that "BigYank76" should have paid more attention to the actual content of the article to avoid drawing wrong conclusions. So, while "AlanC" is defending his own face, he/she launches a counter attack to the face of "BigYank76" by criticising him/her in return. "AlanC" concludes by mocking "BigYank76" for what he/she thinks is hyper-sensitive behaviour: *Not too hard for a big guy, surely?* By addressing "BigYank76" as *big guy*, "AlanC" also implies that if "BigYank76" could not accept such a criticism, her/his behaviour would be rather immature.

- (38) BigYank76  
 16 Sep 09, 4:14pm  
 <quote>  
 AlanC - if I had any feelings you would have hurt them with that last crack.  
 </quote>  
 I have no intention of hurting your feelings - I would just like you to accept that you did not read the article carefully and were erroneous in your comment on it. Not too hard for a big guy, surely?

(*Guardian Online*, September 20, 2009, "Sceptics\_seize\_0045")

#### 4.4.4.2. *Offensive response: Counter attack to defend the face of another commentator*

The second category identified in my data includes interactions in which an interlocutor counter attacks an offender to defend the face of another commentator. In such cases the participant who utters the counter attack has not been the intended recipient of the initial face attack but a member of the actual recipients. Nevertheless, the participant feels the need to defend the face of the attacked co-commentator by launching a counter attack. Example (39) is a discussion thread on global warming and environmentalism taken from *Telegraph Online*. Here the commentator “John Law” responds to “Marcus Hunt”, who had previously offended “David Cram”, another co-commentator. “Marcus Hunt” called “David Cram” *an idiot* (see <quote>) because he/she thinks that the latter’s previous comment includes claims on the reasons for global warming which are not at all well-supported. Interestingly, here it is not the offended who responds to the attack. Instead another commentator called “John Law” counters to defend the face of his/her co-commentator: *I don’t think David claimed anything very much; merely referred to some data that people might like to refer to*. “John Law” thus justifies “David Cram’s” comment as reasonable before launching into a very aggressive counter attack against “Marcus Hunt”: *You on the other hand sound like a fascist shit. You are a total disservice to environmentalism*. Labelling someone a *fascist shit* can be rated as a very offensive and a stark break with the newspaper netiquette rules. It is striking that a person who was not at all affected by the first personal attack would go to such lengths to defend another person that she/he probably just knows by her/his pseudonym and may have been conversing with in the past on the news site.

(39) <quote>  
Marcus Hunt  
on September 19, 2009  
at 06:21 AM  
To David Cram: You’re an idiot  
</quote>  
I don’t think David claimed anything very much; merely referred to some  
data that people might like to refer to. You on the other hand sound  
like a fascist shit. You are a total disservice to environmentalism.

(*Telegraph Online*, September 19, 2009 “Climate\_change\_campaigners0045”)

#### 4.4.4.3. *Offensive response: Counter attack to defend the face of the journalist*

The third category identified in my data includes interactions in which an interlocutor counter attacks an offender to defend the face of the journalist. Similar to the second category, these are cases in which the participant who utters the counter attack has not been the intended recipient of the initial face attack but a member of the actual recipients. In any case, the offence against the journalist has been aggravating enough for a member of the commentators to respond with a counter attack in defence of the author. Example (40) is taken from a discussion thread on the article titled “Why I threw the shoe” published on *Guardian Online*. The article is a translated statement by Muntazer al-Zaidi, an Iraqi reporter, who explains his motivation for having targeted former U.S. President George W. Bush with a shoe during a press conference in December 2008. The discussion thread reveals that not all of the commentators are in favour of his action for which he had to serve nine months in prison. One of the commentators who rebukes Mr. al-Zaidi for his deed, attacks the journalist with the patronizing statement: *You throw like a girl*. It is thus also not very surprising that the comment was not approved of by the *Guardian* moderators. Despite its deletion by the moderators, the comment remains visible in the discussion thread because the commentator “BeautifulBurnout” quotes the statement in the beginning of her/his contribution. She/he does so in order to respond in defence of the face of the author with following personal counter attack: ... *and you post like the keyboard commando you are*. Calling somebody a *keyboard commando* basically implies that she/he is a coward who is very outspoken about judging the actions of others but who has not had to act in a similar real-life situation her/himself.<sup>148</sup>

(40) <quote>  
You throw like a girl.  
</quote>  
... and you post like the keyboard commando you are.

(*Guardian Online*, September 19, 2009, “Why\_I\_threw\_0020”)

Also, in this category, it is interesting that commentators stand up for a journalist who they are not likely to know personally. Admittedly, reactions in this discussion thread may be a special case since the author shares an account of a personal experience with far-reaching legal consequences and the political backdrop of the case may trigger

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<sup>148</sup> Cf. <http://www.encyclo.co.uk/define/Keyboard%20Commando> (accessed July 13, 2011).

more emotional reactions than a less controversial topic. Nevertheless, the commentator “BeautifulBurnout” could not accept that such a personal attack at the author should go unnoticed without a counter defence.

#### 4.4.4.4. *Offensive response: Counter attack to defend the face of a key actor*

The fourth and last category identified in my data includes interactions in which an interlocutor counter attacks an offender with a personal attack to defend the face of a key actor in the article. By key actor I mean a person that is discussed in detail in a news story. Just like in the second and third category, the personal counter attack is issued by a commentator who has not been the target of the original offence. Example (41) is taken from a discussion thread on *Mail Online* in which commentators discuss the latest news on Katie Price, a British model and reality TV celebrity. The article discusses Ms. Price’s confession to her friends that she had been raped by another British celebrity several years ago. A number of the commentators in the thread are doubtful of the story’s truth-value. They cannot believe that she would only reveal such a harrowing event in her life years later and think that this is just a tasteless media stunt by Ms. Price to re-gain some of her lost popularity in the public eye. They are most suspicious of the fact that she does not want to reveal the name of the alleged rapist and therefore accuse her of just telling a lie to suit her crude hidden agenda. Thereupon, “MissCulture” jumps to the defence of Ms. Price: *Why does any woman regardless of her background have to reveal anything that she chooses NOT to?* She/he does not stop at justifying Ms. Price’s action but launches a counter attack against those commentators, claiming that they are no better themselves with their aggressive and inappropriate behaviour towards Ms. Price. “MissCulture” claims that their conduct reminds her/him of a *Spanish Inquisition*. She/he continues to accuse the commentators of the most *spiteful and vindictive treatment* and concludes by calling them, together with the rest of the British public, a *sanctimonious lot*.

(41) My god people - is this going to turn into the Spanish Inquisition or something!

Why does any woman regardless of her background have to reveal anything that she chooses NOT to? Ms Price made a comment regarding her traumatic ordeal - only a voyeuristic media and public would latch onto the statement like a dog with a bone. [...] I have never seen such spiteful and vindictive treatment of an individual the way Ms Price is being vilified these days...what a sanctimonious lot the British public are.

(*Mail Online*, September 17, 2009, “Katie\_violently\_attacked\_0046”)

Interestingly, she/he remains the only person in the discussion thread to defend Ms. Price. Arguably, she/he may be a fan of Ms. Price and therefore felt personally offended by the inappropriate comments of her co-commentators. Obviously, counter attacks to defend the faces of key actors are different from the first three categories because the offended key actors are not part of the immediate communicative situation in reader responses. Therefore, one is more likely to find reactions by commentators than to find key actors who would join the discussion thread to defend their own face. Such a case is very unlikely, and it is thus also not surprising that it did not occur in my data.

In summary, with the exception of personal counter attacks to defend one's own face, the other three strategies can be associated with the complexity of the communicative situation where actual recipients are witnesses of offences against intended recipients. These offences may be inappropriate to such an extent that an actual recipient may also feel offended or at least upset to such an extent that she/he thinks it necessary to stand up for the victim of the attack and respond to the offence with an offensive counter attack. It is striking that despite the relative anonymity and distance among participants in reader response sections, actual recipients feel the need to save the face of a co-commentator, journalist or key actor.

#### *4.4.5. End of conflict: An overview of strategies*

In this section I am going to discuss strategies which interlocutors may use to terminate a conflictive exchange. The strategies were originally suggested by Vuchinich (1990) to analyse family conflicts and applied by Bousfield (2008) in his study of impolite face-to-face encounters:

- 1.) withdrawal,
- 2.) compromise,
- 3.) 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention,
- 4.) submission to the opponent,
- 5.) stand-off.

I will discuss the first three strategies in detail since they were also applicable to my data (see Table 12). The fourth and fifth strategy did not occur in my data but I will say a few words about these types in section 4.4.5.4.

#### 4.4.5.1. *Withdraw to mark the end of a conflict*

When a participant does not want to get too deeply involved in a conflictive exchange she/he may use the defence strategy of “withdrawing” (cf. Bousfield 2008a:215). When a person withdraws, she/he indicates that they are no longer willing to actively take part (verbally or physically) in a discussion, debate or conflictive exchange. Since my data set consists of written interactions among physically distant participants, only verbally announced withdrawals from a conflictive exchange could be investigated in the data. Considering the nature of my data, the investigated discussion threads across all five newspapers contained just 1 occurrence of a withdrawal strategy. Oddly enough, the participant announced her/his withdrawal but did not execute it in the end.

Example (42) is taken from *Express Online* and centres around an ongoing dispute among the commentator “Welsh\_Dragon” and his/her co-commentators “Hookit58”, “kingdom,” “hip\_hopper” and “wannabeamp”. Based on hints in the users’ comments, it can be concluded that they have known each other virtually for quite a while and that they have been commenting on the same discussion threads in the past. Indications for repetitive conflictive clashes among these users are also noticeable across a number of discussion threads in my data set from *Express Online*. The existence of such historical relations is also evident in the fact that “Welsh\_Dragon” is the second participant to comment on the article and that neither “Hookit58”, “kingdom,” “hip\_hopper” nor “wannabeamp” had commented at this point. In any case, the intensity of the previous disputes appears to have increased to an unbearable level for “Welsh\_Dragon” so that she/he decides to quit as an active commentator in the reader response sections. However, before announcing her/his withdrawal, “Welsh\_Dragon” starts off with a tirade of personal attacks specifically against “Hookit58” and “kingdom”. She/he accuses them of cowardice, dishonesty, arrogance, stupidity, intentional evilness and highly offensive behaviour towards her/him. The commentator even goes as far as to claim that their behaviour is so unacceptable that they will be legally accountable for their acts. “Welsh\_Dragon” concludes that the behaviour of “Hookit58”, “kingdom” and their companions “hip\_hopper” and “wannabeamp” have caused her/him so much emotional pain that she/he is no longer willing to participate in this forum. “Welsh\_Dragon” also underlines that it is very unfortunate that she/he is forced to withdraw based on the behaviour of the four commentators. So in fact, “Welsh\_Dragon” makes a very

poignant announcement to justify her/his imminent withdrawal from the reader response section on *Express Online*: *Unfortunately I will not be contributing further to this forum due to the actions of these two – there is no doubt that they have been encouraged and assisted by hiphopper and wannabeamp as the postings by these two make clear*. Interestingly, however, despite “Welsh\_Dragon’s” emotional outcry, she/he does not execute her/his intent. In fact, it appears to be a theatrical display of a fake withdrawal to probably mark her/his intense discontent with the co-commentators. As indicated in the first line of the comment, the contribution’s main function is that of a warning to alert other commentators to not get involved with the before-mentioned commentators. Such an interpretation appears reasonable since “Welsh\_Dragon” continues to dominate the remaining discussion thread with a total of 11 further contributions aimed at a number of participants including also her/his four main opponents. On top, my data reveals that she/he also remains an active contributor to various other discussion threads over the following couple of days.

(42) \*\*\*\*\*WARNING\*\*\*\*\*

02.09.09, 6:47pm

Hookit58 and kingdom are one and the same. Argue with either and they run crying to the moderators demanding your account be suspended. No doubt this account too will be suspended the moment either of these pathetic creeps realises it is here. The libellous comments and obsessive behaviour of these two underhand, and lying individuals have made membership of this forum highly unpleasant. However, what they failed to realise because they are too arrogant and stupid to do so, is that their actions constituted a criminal offence. As such the Express are legally bound to hand over their details to the investigating officers. I look forward to meeting them in court.

Unfortunately I will not be contributing further to this forum due to the actions of these two – there is no doubt that they have been encouraged and assisted by hiphopper and wannabeamp as the postings by thesetwo make clear.

I therefore advise you all to totally ignore hookit58, kingdom, wannabeamp and hiphopper as they are demonstrably evil and obsessive and should you cross them you too will find yourselves the victims of their abusive hate campaigns and scurrilous false allegations.

(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009, “Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0002”)

In summary, it does not appear to be characteristic of user behaviour on reader response sites to comment on their withdrawal after an offensive exchange. There are surely cases of “physical” withdrawals from the discussion threads after a conflictive exchange since it is very easy to exit an offensive situation by just navigating away



from the discussion thread. Such a physical withdrawal would be much more marked in a face-to-face situation. Bearing these considerations in mind, users also do not appear to have the desire (or simply cannot be bothered) to let other commentators verbally know that they have been offended to such an extent that they want to withdraw from a conversation.

#### 4.4.5.2. *Compromise to end a conflict*

A compromise is achieved when interlocutors reach a middle ground between their opposing views in a conflict. Clear-cut cases of compromises were not that frequent in my data. This also counts for Bousfield's activity types. One case that could be interpreted as a compromise is the exchange between a journalist and a commentator on *Guardian Online* (see examples (43) and (44)). In the discussion thread, commentators debate Sunny Hundal's article titled "BNP doesn't deserve political respect". There, the journalist shares his views why he thinks that the BBC needs to apply strict editorial judgment with the far-right British National Party (BNP), should the broadcaster decide to give them air time on the political TV show "Question Time". One of Hundal's arguments says that he thinks a rational debate will not help to deter BNP supporters and convince them to give up their loyalty to the extremist party. The commentator "Waltz" attacks the journalist accusing him of misjudging the consequences of the BNP appearance on such a show: *Spectacularly missing the point again*. "Waltz" argues that such a public debate is not about helping to diminish the number of BNP supporters but could help to prevent doubtful voters from actually voting the BNP.

(43) <quote>

So if they already hate the BNP, then they're likely to receive information exposing the BNP with glee. Its supporters will simply see such information as propaganda or falsehoods promoted by people with an agenda.

</quote>

Spectacularly missing the point again.

Exposing the BNP through public debate isn't about deterring its supporters who, by definition, agree with BNP policies - not because they don't know what the BNP stands for but because they do know and agree). Public debate with the BNP is about exposing its agenda to all those who aren't currently BNP supporters but think they might, maybe, one day just vote BNP because they're hacked off with the other parties/society/whatever. It's the "might be persuaded to vote BNP" crowd that matters here, not those who've already made up their minds one way or the other.

That is why such debates are important (as are the principles of freedom of opinion, democracy and so on).

(*Guardian Online*, September 07, 2009, “The\_BNP\_doesnt\_deserve\_0021”)

A couple of contributions later, the journalist reacts to “Waltz’s” comment admitting that the commentator has offered a valuable counter argument: *Waltz – you make a good point*. However, while the journalist makes concessions to his original argument, he counters again to weaken the compromise:

(44) [...] Waltz – you make a good point. Though given the fact a huge majority of people have chosen not to vote for the BNP despite given the tough circumstances, I’d say their support has plateaued. I’d be surprised if most people in Britain didn’t know about the BNP’s background.

(*Guardian Online*, September 07, 2009, “The\_BNP\_doesnt\_deserve\_0029”)

While there are a number of cases in the data set where people agree on some arguments but do not agree on others, clear-cut cases of compromises to terminate a conflict were few. This may have to do with the nature of the activity type where people’s main aim is to share their different point of views, and where it is very acceptable to “agree to disagree” without reaching a compromise.

#### 4.4.5.3. *Intervention of a third party to end a conflict*

According to Bousfield (2008a: 208), this conflict resolution strategy means that a third party intervenes to stop or even resolve a conflictive offensive exchange. Generally, this involves a third party that has some form of control over the participants. While this strategy was not frequently observed in the activity types studied by Bousfield (2008a), third party intervention is a common and even institutionalized practice on all reader response sites studied here. Participants who do not adhere to the principle rules of conduct as noted in the newspapers’ netiquette rules are likely to face one of the following two consequences: Either, members of the moderation team delete the inappropriate contribution in question or in cases of repetitive and severe transgressions, users may run the risk of having their account shut down to ban them entirely. Such bans may also severely limit the use of other community tools (e.g. fora, polls etc.) provided on the online news sites. In practice, due to the high amount of daily contributions, the moderation team also relies on alert reader response readers to report transgressions to the team. Thus, I would like to

argue that any vigilant co-commentator or reader that flags another participant's comment to the moderation team exercises some form of power as dominant 3<sup>rd</sup> party in a conflictive exchange. This is especially true if the moderation team indeed deletes the respective comment following a participant's complaint. Let me here refer back to the conflict between the user "Welsh\_Dragon" and her/his co-commentators "Hookit58" and "kingdom" on *Express Online*. Example (45) illustrates that "Welsh\_Dragon" is very aware of her/his co-commentators' potential power to intervene and influence moderators:

(45) \*\*\*\*\*WARNING\*\*\*\*\*  
 02.09.09, 6:47pm  
 Hookit58 and kingdom are one and the same. Argue with either and they run crying to the moderators demanding you account be suspended. No doubt this account too will be suspended the moment either of these pathetic creeps realises it is here. [...]

(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009, "Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0002")

As her/his comment reveals, the *Express Online* moderation team has already suspended one of "Welsh\_Dragon's" previous accounts. Interestingly, "Welsh\_Dragon" appears to be of the opinion that it is not her/his behaviour that was mainly responsible for the removal of the account but his/her co-commentators' apparently insistent efforts to persuade the moderators to eliminate her/his user profile. Unfortunately, it is impossible for a researcher to collect information on the number of moderated comments following readers' or co-commentators' complaints at the newspapers. However, meta-comments like "Welsh\_Dragon's" provide valuable hints to understand the dynamics of 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention in conflictive exchanges on reader response sites.

Also, while it is a common practice on all newspaper sites here studied to actively moderate content, *Guardian Online* is the only newspaper in the data set that makes their moderation policies visually transparent to the community. In other words, *Guardian Online* flags deleted comments "on record" for everybody to see. This transparency refers to the visual layout of the discussion thread and does not automatically imply that *Guardian Online* informs the community about the exact reasons why a comment was removed.<sup>149</sup> As illustrated in Figure 43, *Guardian Online*


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<sup>149</sup> A panel discussion among various stakeholders involved in moderation policies on *Guardian Online* (cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/oct/25/panel-debate->

will still display the offender's user name (in this case "thylacosmilus") in the discussion thread but remove the actual content of her/his contribution by replacing it with the message: *This comment has been removed by a moderator. Replies may also be deleted.*<sup>150</sup> As the message says, this may also affect "innocent" commentators who happened to reply to an offensive comment. They also run the risk of having their comment removed during the moderation process.<sup>151</sup>

**Figure 43.** Moderated discussion thread on *Guardian Online*

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**Pagey**  
07 Sep 09, 12:19pm (about 22 hours ago)

The reality is that Griffin will make a last minute withdrawal, puffing about not wanting to expose himself to "liberal media bias" when he sees the make-up of the panel will be sufficient to reveal that he's afraid of really being challenged, because he has no cogent arguments.

[Recommend? \(3\)](#)  
[Report abuse](#)  
[Clip | Link](#)


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**thylacosmilus**  
07 Sep 09, 12:19pm (about 22 hours ago)

This comment has been removed by a moderator. Replies may also be deleted.

---



**skipissatan**  
07 Sep 09, 12:22pm (about 22 hours ago)

@ Paulola

Why do Labour fear having their policies scrutinized by someone who will not be silenced by political correctness? Because the legacy of their Marxist social policy on Britain is indefensible

Marxist? do you even know what that means? I sincerely doubt that an actual marxist would have overseen a reduction in social mobility, countless measures in the favour of big business, concentration of more wealth in the hands of a few etc, again the word you are searching for is thatcherite, of possibly friedmanite of neo-con.....

[Recommend? \(12\)](#)  
[Report abuse](#)  
[Clip | Link](#)

web-moderation, accessed Oct 25, 2010) revealed that moderation is a difficult issue for journalists, moderators, users and lawyers alike. Jay Reilly, a regular commentator in *Guardian Online's* Cif areas, who was banned in the past, accuses *Guardian Online* of missing transparency. He argues that "Guardian's moderation is frequently arbitrary, partisan and at times plain farcical." He admits that one can contact moderators to ask for clarifications why a comment has been deleted but concludes that moderators almost never respond.

<sup>150</sup> This standard message was used on *Guardian Online* in September 2009 during the data collection period. At the present moment, *Guardian Online* provides a slightly more elaborate message, which reads as follows: "This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our community standards. Replies may also be deleted. For more detail see our FAQs." (status June 04, 2011).

<sup>151</sup> The fact that other people's appropriate comments are also deleted can have to do with the technical setup of the discussion threads on *Guardian Online*. The most probable reason however seems to be that there are surely cases where commentators quote a part of the offender's comment in their reply. To make sure that all traces of the offensive comment are removed, it seems likely and most efficient that *Guardian Online* deletes such replies as well.

*Guardian Online*'s practice to remove the actual content but to still display the name of the offensive user may be interpreted as a form of pillorying someone in front of a public audience. This policy may thus have an educational aim to prevent future offences and act as a warning to other commentators. Accordingly, in conflictive reader responses this form of third party intervention can serve to stop or even resolve a conflict. On the other hand, it may also spark new offences of upset users whose comments were removed.

On the other newspaper sites studied here, the moderation process is not transparent. Offensive comments simply disappear from the discussion thread, and newspapers do not mark it visually in the reader response sections for the audience. Whether visually transparent or not, 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention in discussion threads is a strategy to end or resolve conflictive sequences. However, it is still possible that conflicts may continue behind the scenes via different channels (i.e. banned users who write offensive complaint e-mails to the moderation team).

While 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention is institutionalized at newspapers in the form of moderation, there is also a different type of 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention possible from the users' perspective. On the one hand, there may be commentators that get involved into other people's argument. On the other hand, users who counter attack another user to save the face of the journalist or another commentator could also be described as a form of 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervener. In these cases, however, 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention is not as powerful since commentators do not have sufficient control over their co-commentators to end the conflict. They may though have some form of positive influence on other participants to resolve a conflict.

#### *4.4.5.4. Submission to opponent and stand-off to end a conflict*

Bousfield's data included two further conflict resolution strategies described as "submission to opponent" and "stand-off". Both strategies were observed in a number of Bousfield's data sets but did not occur in my data. When an interlocutor submits to an opponent, the person accepts and completely submits to the offensive claims made by another participant (Bousfield 2008a:207). This strategy was especially prominent in Bousfield's military and police encounters. Again, this may be connected to much stronger power relations in military and police encounters where hierarchical relations are more felt by participants than it would ever be the case in reader response sections.

The strategy of “stand off” describes a situation where neither of two interlocutors involved in an encounter is willing to submit to the opponent to terminate the conflict and continue to argue, in theory, for an indefinite period of time. This strategy appears neither of significance in Bousfield’s data nor in my data. In any case this is a problematic strategy for categorization purposes since in practice there is always a certain time frame that a researcher captures with the data analysis. As such, the researcher simply may not know whether a conflict ends as a stand off.

#### 4.4.6. *Results and discussion of the sequential response strategies in a conflict*

In this section I am going to discuss the response strategies that can be used during the middle stage of a conflict and for conflict resolution (see also Table 12) in terms of their overall frequency in my data set. This section also recaps and expands on key arguments from the previous section to discuss possible reasons for the different frequencies of the strategies in the data set. Table 14 summarizes the types of strategies that participants used in order to react to an initial or consecutive face threatening personal attack in a conflictive encounter.

**Table 14.** Sequential response strategies in reader responses

Middle	n=	%	End	n=	%
<b>OFFENSIVE RESPONSE</b> <i>counter attack that defends face of</i>					
1) self	100	37			
2) key actor	55	20	3rd party intervention	44	77
3) other commentator	31	12	compromise	12	21
4) journalist	27	10	withdrawal	1	2
<b>DEFENSIVE RESPONSE</b>					
ignore	54	20			
accept	2	1			
<b>Total</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>57</b>	<b>100</b>

These strategies were identified in the corpus of 1,750 reader responses. The total of 269 instances of the strategies during the middle of a conflict and the 57 instances of strategies to end a conflict occurred in 223 reader responses out of the total of 1,750 reader responses. As explained in the previous section, I did not investigate the strategy of “silence”, which could also be used during a conflict, because it was impossible to track in the type of data investigated. One reader response may include multiple strategies as a comment may be addressed to different participants. For

example, a user who was personally attacked by another participant may first counter attack the offender to defend their own face. In the same comment the participant may then go on and also counter attack yet another participant to defend the face of e.g. the journalist.

In terms of strategies during the middle stage of a conflict, offensive response strategies were more frequent with 79% than defensive response strategies with 21%. On the one hand, this may be related to the activity type that supports a culture of heated debates and thus may also encourage users to act more confrontationally. However, the circumstance that power hierarchies and one's social standing are less obvious and ultimately of less consequence for participants in reader response sections than they are in e.g. military training or police-citizen encounters may be more important in this context. In fact, participants may not know each other at all, and confrontations are not face-to-face. Thus, users may also feel less hesitant to act in an offensive rather than a defensive manner. In terms of the offensive response strategies, offensive counter attacks to defend one's own face were most frequent with 100 occurrences (37%). At first glance it is not a surprise that counter attacks to defend one's own face are most frequent in the data. Participants act as highly individualistic members in reader response sections, and personal attacks are aimed at specific persons. Therefore, it seems more logical that they would defend their own face rather than the face of a distant and often totally unknown participant. To put it differently, it seems natural that if users want to respond at all, they would do so when it concerns their own person rather than to the make effort and respond to an offence when it concerns somebody else.

Nevertheless, despite the distance between communication partners and the fact that in many cases participants do not know each other very well, participants also feel the need to defend the face of other participants in an impolite conflictive encounter. As previously mentioned, this phenomenon may be connected to the complexity of the communicative situation in reader responses. All in all, offensive counter attacks to defend the face of a key actor in an article were second most frequent with 55 occurrences (20%), followed by counter attacks to defend the face of another commentator or the journalist of an article with 31 and 27 occurrences respectively (12% and 10%). The fact that journalists' faces are least often defended in a counter attack may also be related to the circumstance that in the data set not all articles that readers responded to are of the same genre. While the articles that readers

most frequently responded to on *Telegraph Online* and *Guardian Online* were often opinion or comment pieces by the journalists, *Mail Online*, *Express Online* and *Sun Online* articles that readers responded to were most frequently from the “hard” news section. Because of the different genres, journalists also take a more prominent position as a communication partner on *Telegraph Online* and *Guardian Online*. It is thus not surprising that all instances where indeed a user felt the need to respond to an offender to defend the face of a journalist occurred on *Telegraph Online* and *Guardian Online*. In the data of the other three newspapers this strategy did not occur at all.

Based on the data, counter attacks to defend the face of another participant, a key actor or a journalist were likely to be motivated by one of the following reasons. In some cases, participants who defend another participant had developed a friendship previously (e.g. on *Express Online*). In other cases, participants were probably “fans” of key actors (e.g. football and celebrity fans on *Sun Online*). In yet other cases participants appeared to have felt some sort of empathy for a key actor (e.g. victims of some sort of crime e.g. on *Mail Online*). The same is likely for supporters of certain journalists on *Guardian Online* and *Telegraph Online*. However, in many cases it appeared that a commentator felt that the treatment of another participant by an offender was apparently so inappropriate that it could not be simply ignored despite the fact that the commentator had not been attacked themselves and the commentator also did not have any previous relational bonds with the participant he/she defended.

In terms of the two defensive strategies identified in the data, the strategy of ignoring appears to be the only characteristic defence strategy of reader responses with 20% (54 occurrences). The frequency of this strategy is possibly slightly distorted by the fact that it may also include cases where participants who were personally attacked simply did not realize that they had been attacked and thus did not intentionally ignore the offender in their subsequent postings. On the other hand, the communicative setting makes it very easy for people to ignore others since they do not have to confront each other face-to-face. As noted in section 4.4.3.2 the strategy of acceptance occurred only twice and does not appear to be characteristic of reader responses. This may be related to the fact that participants operate in an environment that is relatively free of social rules. Of course there are certain netiquette rules that users are supposed to adhere to, but the set of rules is arguably much more limited than what one would expect of participants in different face-to-face setting. Also, as



mentioned in section 4.4.3.2, this is especially true if power relations in such situations are not equal. For example, in a conflict between a teacher and a pupil, an apology may be useful to positively reinforce a relationship after a conflictive situation. In reader responses the relational benefit of an apology may be very low between (pseudo)anonymous users as often they are not likely to meet again online. Arguably reader response communities may not even expect that others return online to post an apology.

Conflict resolution strategies were more than 4 times less frequent than strategies that participants applied during the middle stage of a conflict (57 versus 269 occurrences). Of the conflict resolution strategies, 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention accounted for 77% (44 occurrences) followed by compromises with 21% (12 occurrences) and 1 instance of a withdrawal with 2% (1 occurrence). Despite the fact that 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention was most frequent, it needs to be added that this figure is not representative of the overall data set as it was only possible to retrieve this data from *Guardian Online*. As mentioned, this was the only newspaper in which I could trace 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention in the form of comment deletion by moderators. Out of the 350 comments analysed on *Guardian Online*, 44 comments were flagged as deleted by moderators.<sup>152</sup> This accounts for 13% of all reader responses on *Guardian Online*. Nevertheless, this figure could give us some indication that a similar share of reader responses may have been deleted across the other newspapers. Having said that, such an estimation needs to be taken with reservation as the amount of moderation may vary considerably across newspapers. Also, newspaper themselves do not offer any official figures on the amount of deleted comments to support this claim here. Nevertheless, assuming the same amount of deletion on other newspapers this strategy would add up to 220 instances of this strategy and would make it by far the strongest strategy overall.

Though compromises were the second most frequent strategy, one reservation needs to be mentioned here as well. As indicated in section 4.4.5.2, there were few clear-cut cases of compromises in the data. In many cases participants agreed on some points during an offensive encounter but continued to disagree on others. Since reader response communities encourage discussion and accept that disagreement among

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<sup>152</sup> Moderation could occur at any point in time in the chronological sequence of the published reader responses.

participants is an integral part of the debate culture, it is not so surprising that this strategy did not occur more frequently in the data set even in an offensive conflictive situation.

There was 1 instance of a fake withdrawal (see section 4.4.5.1) in the data set. While a withdrawal in a face-to-face situation would be much more marked, given the communicative situation in reader responses people may simply withdraw unnoticed after an argument without announcing it to other participants. Due to the often loosely structured community, participants may also not even want to spend the time to announce their withdrawal from a conflict. This could also explain the low frequency of this strategy in the data. In any case, marked withdrawals appear not to be a characteristic strategy in reader responses to end a conflict.

Overall, it can be noted that participants use a much more limited set of response strategies than Bousfield (2008a) discovered in his data. This may be related to the different activity types, communicative settings and power dynamics that Bousfield investigated in his data. For example, only two of the seven defence strategies identified by Bousfield occurred in my data. Of these strategies, only the strategy of ignoring appears to be characteristic of reader responses. Also, only three of the five types of conflict resolution strategies were identified in the data. Of these, only 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention appears to be characteristic of this activity type. Overall, conflict resolution strategies occurred almost 4 times less often than strategies during the middle of a conflict. This circumstance may be interpreted as evidence that conflict resolution (except for 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention) is not a distinctive feature of offensive reader response conflicts.

Admittedly, the results may of course also be connected to the characteristics of my data set since I deliberately made a cut at 50 user comments per article even if articles' discussion threads had attracted more than 50 comments. To counter-balance this limitation of my data set, I therefore investigated my data beyond the 50 comments boundary to check whether this would provide a different result. In total, I checked for conflict resolution strategies beyond the 50 comments cut in a sub-corpus of three out of the five newspapers in this study. I chose one from each market segment: the up-market *Guardian Online*, the mid-market *Mail Online* and the down-market *Sun Online* (see Table 15).

While I thus considered 1,750 reader responses across 5 newspapers (50 comments per article, 7 articles per newspaper) in my original analysis, I now

checked the entire discussion threads which were produced in response to the articles in my data set. This adds up to a total of 9,187 comments which were analysed for conflict resolution strategies. The split is as follows: 3,991 comments on *Guardian Online*, 4,250 comments on *Mail Online* and 946 comments on *Sun Online*. On average, an article in my data set had attracted 570 comments on *Guardian Online*, 607 comments on *Mail Online* and 135 comments on *Sun Online*.<sup>153</sup>

**Table 15.** The data set for conflict resolution strategies

Newspaper	Market segment	Articles n=	Comments n=	Ø comments per article n=
<i>Guardian Online</i>	up	7	3,991	570
<i>Mail Online</i>	mid	7	4,250	607
<i>Sun Online</i>	down	7	946	135
<b>Total</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>9,187</b>	<b>n.a.</b>

Interestingly, the analysis of this much larger corpus confirmed that conflict resolution is not characteristic in this activity type. Impolite conflicts that had been triggered in the first 50 comments among participants did not get resolved to a higher extent beyond the 50 comments boundary even if the involved participants continued to participate in the discussion thread. No further marked withdrawals were noted. Beyond the 1,750 comments boundary, only 1 more compromise of an ongoing conflict was identified on *Sun Online* and 3 more compromises on *Guardian Online* in the corpus of 9,187 comments. On *Guardian Online*, the percentage for 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention by moderators even dropped from 13% in 350 comments (44 occurrences) in the original corpus to 7,5% in 3,991 comments (315 occurrences). Also the other two strategies identified by Bousfield did not occur in the extended data set (i.e. submission to the opponent and stand-off). In summary, conflict resolution may simply not be an integral part of the communicative behaviour of users in this activity type. This might have to do with the low level of relational bonding among the commentators. Non-hierarchical relations among users may also play a role here. Participants are not obliged or encouraged by any superior social force to resolve a conflict.

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<sup>153</sup> Of the top 7 discussion threads analysed in this study on *Guardian Online*, the longest discussion thread contained 1,068 comments and the shortest 363 comments. On *Mail Online* the longest discussion thread contained 917 comments and the shortest 454 comments. On *Sun Online* the longest discussion thread contained 347 comments and the shortest discussion thread 86 comments.

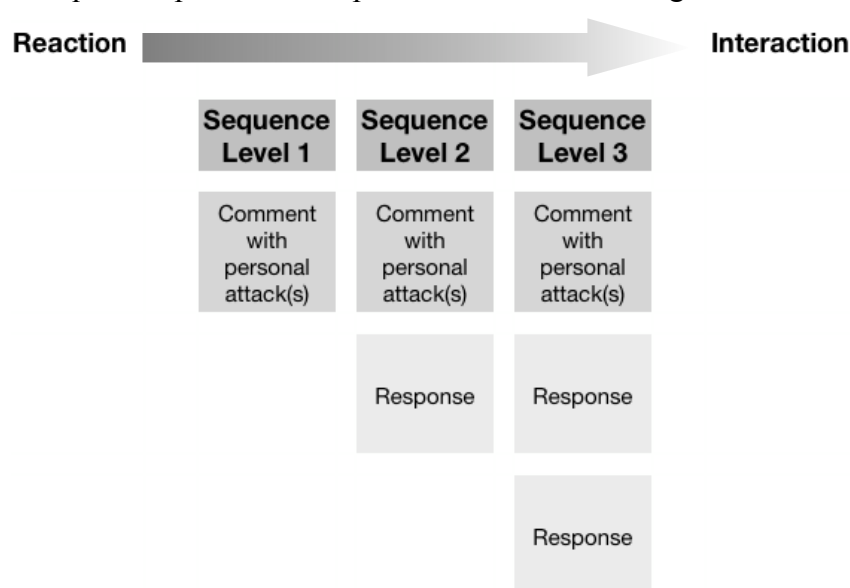
Though I did not check systematically for strategies that participants use during the middle stage of a conflict beyond the 1,750 comments boundary in the extended corpus of 9,187 comments, I had a close look at apologies in the extended corpus. Only one more apology was found on *Guardian Online* in a conflict that had been triggered during an interaction in the first 50 comments. This evidence also supported my initial assumptions that apologies are not characteristic of this activity type.

#### 4.5. The reactive-interactive sequential patterns in conflictive exchanges: Introduction and methodology

While the previous section focused on the different types of strategies that can be used during the various stages of an impolite conflict exchange, in this section I am going to discuss the discursive length of these exchanges. Thereby, it is also possible to identify the core interactional structure of personal conflicts in reader responses. Despite their asynchronous and distant nature, reader responses are technically designed for dialogic exchanges among participants. However, as discussed in section 2.4, the available technical possibility does not automatically imply that users will use the tool in such a manner. In this section, I will demonstrate that the interactional structure of personal conflicts can be situated along a reactive-interactive continuum.

To trace the sequential length of every impolite conflictive exchange in my data set I counted the number of responses to an initial personal attack. Figure 44 visualizes conflicts in terms of the possible basic sequential structures.

**Figure 44.** Sequential patterns of impolite conflictive exchanges



A Level 1 sequence means that a person utters a personal attack towards a participant (i.e. other commentator, journalist, moderators)<sup>154</sup> but does not receive any response neither from the attacked person themselves nor from another commentator who wants to defend the face of the attacked person. A Level 2 sequence means that a person utters a personal attack. Thereupon, the attacked person or a person defending the face of the attacked responds. The response can be realized with any of the strategies discussed in sections 4.4.3 to 4.4.5.3 (e.g. a counter attack). A Level 3 sequence means that a person utters a first personal attack. Thereupon, the attacked person or a person defending the face of the attacked responds. At this stage, the initial offender responds again. Also he/she will make use again of any of the strategies mentioned in sections 4.4.3 to 4.4.5.3. Level 4 and beyond follow the same logic with the involved participants continuing to extend the impolite conflict. It may of course happen that a person becomes involved in more than one conflict at the same time. The conflicts one participant is involved in with different participants are counted separately if they do not relate back to the same initial conflict trigger. Since comments appear in chronological order in the discussion threads it may occur that an exchange is interrupted by unrelated messages. Those were disregarded.

I argue in line with Schultz (2000), Rafaeli & Sudweeks (1997) and Hoffmann (2010) that we can differentiate between reactive and interactive conflictive exchanges (for a detailed discussion of their views see section 2.4). So despite the fact that reader responses are a form of communication that allows dialogic exchanges, it is not always used by commentators for dialogic exchanges and especially not consistently in conflict situation. As already discussed in section 2.4, according to Schultz (2000), reactive communication can be defined as a message that refers to a previous message but that does not create an ongoing flow of messages as we would expect in a truly interactive exchange (see Figure 44). Hoffmann (2010:215; 225) confirms what Rafaeli & Sudweeks (1997) already concluded more than a decade earlier: The possible levels of interaction are not an inherent quality of a technical means but depend on the participants' choices. As such, one form of communication

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<sup>154</sup> Naturally, only commentators, journalists and moderators are likely to act as active communicative interlocutors in a conflictive exchange (see also section 4.3). Personal attacks against key actors have not been accounted for since key actors are also not very likely to react, and thus no conflict development would be traceable. Nevertheless, key actors are accounted for in situations where a commentator is involved in a conflict with another commentator to defend the face of a key actor.

may allow for a reactive and interactive exchange at the same time. The results below will confirm this claim.

#### 4.5.1. Results and discussion of the reactive-interactive sequential patterns in conflictive exchanges

The analysis of impolite conflicts among participants in my data set revealed that interactions were largely reactive rather than interactive exchanges across the data set. Table 16 summarizes the results of the analysis for all five newspapers. Overall in the 1,750 comments, 531 user comments were part of one or more conflictive exchanges (30% of all reader responses in the data set). These were not evenly spread across the newspapers. On *Guardian Online* 169 user comments were part of one or more conflictive sequences. *Telegraph Online* was second with 150 user comments followed by *Express Online* with 125 comments. *Sun Online* and *Mail Online* came last with 70 and 17 user comments respectively.

**Table 16.** Results for the sequential discourse patterns of conflictive exchanges

Newspaper	Total comments n=	Total sequences n=	Sequences				Total
			Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4 & beyond	
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	150	138	88%	12%	0%	0%	100%
<i>Mail Online</i>	17	15	87%	13%	0%	0%	100%
<i>Sun Online</i>	70	69	78%	19%	3%	0%	100%
<i>Guardian Online</i>	169	122	72%	23%	3%	2%	100%
<i>Express Online</i>	125	38	34%	29%	16%	21%	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>531</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Reaction  Interaction

Each of these comments contained at least a first personal attack by a participant (Level 1) or if conflicts were already at a more advanced level, comments included one or more of the response strategies (Level 2 and beyond). In total, 382 sequences were identified in the data set ranging from the lowest Level 1 to highest Level 19.

Table 16 also shows that in the discussion threads of all newspapers except for *Express Online*, 70% to almost 90% consisted of cases with initial personal attacks against any of the participants (other commentators, journalists, moderators) that did not receive a response. In the cases where a conflict evolves to the Level 2 and beyond through a response to an initial personal attack, these exchanges remained largely reactive rather than interactive. On average Level 2 sequences account for 19% of all the levels. Level 3 as well as Level 4 sequences and beyond are only found

on *Sun Online*, *Guardian Online* and *Express Online*. They constitute the remaining 6% of all sequence levels.

Four out of the five newspapers show similar tendencies in terms of reactive patterns. *Express Online* shows a more interactive picture. Here conflictive exchanges continue over a higher number of response moves as illustrated in Table 17.

**Table 17.** *Express Online*: Results for the sequential discourse patterns of conflictive exchanges

Sequence level	n=	
1	13	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="width: 100%; height: 100%; background: linear-gradient(to bottom, transparent 49%, #ccc 49% 51%, #ccc 51% 53%, transparent 53%);"></div> <div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg); font-size: 0.8em; margin: 0 5px;">Reaction</div> <div style="width: 100%; height: 100%; background: linear-gradient(to bottom, transparent 49%, #ccc 49% 51%, #ccc 51% 53%, transparent 53%);"></div> <div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg); font-size: 0.8em; margin: 0 5px;">Interaction</div> </div>
2	11	
3	6	
4	2	
5	0	
6	1	
7	2	
8	1	
9	0	
10	1	
11 - 18	0	
19	1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	

While my study obviously only focuses on conflictive exchanges rather than the overall interactive patterns of reader response debates, my findings are echoed in Marcoccia's study (2004:118, 122), which was introduced in section 2.4. As stated there, her study of the overall conversation structure of French news discussion boards revealed that a number of contributions by commentators were composed as monologues. This finding is interesting since the infrastructure would allow for interactive conversations. My findings are also in line with Hoffmann's study (2010:215) of cohesive ties in weblogs, introduced in section 2.4. He also concluded that interactions in comment sections were rare, and most frequently comments were rather autonomous units of discourse. Admittedly, weblog communication as well as discussion board communication are slightly different forms of communication and are not one to one comparable with reader responses. Nevertheless, they share the technical possibility of an interactive conversation structure. Then a comparison of this functionality across the three forms of communication seems to confirm the trend that despite the fact that they are designed for dialogic exchange, they are not always used in such a manner. Building on Schultz's (2000) continuum of reactive to interactive forms of communication (see also section 2.4), the bulk of my data

analysis reveals that reader responses should be situated more towards the reactive side of the spectrum.

This appears to be even more so the case, when it comes to interactions between commentators and journalists. It is striking that while commentators personally attacked journalists directly in 173 comments, there was only one journalist on *Guardian Online* who actually reacted to a number of participants in the respective discussion thread to defend his own face. This finding underlines the argument brought forward in section 2.4 that despite growing possibilities for users and journalists to interact with each other, journalists do not appear to get involved in interactions where they get personally attacked.

*Express Online* stands out from the data set because of its more interactive structure. An explanation for this phenomenon may be found in the number of participants who interact on this online platform. Drawing on a pool of 3,000 comments, of which the 1,750 comments used for the analysis of conflictive sequences are a sub-corpus,<sup>155</sup> I identified the number of unique commentators that produced these comments. I took 600 comments from 12 articles per online media. One discussion string consists of 50 comments. Table 18 illustrates that the 3,000 comments were produced by 1,803 commentators. Interestingly, *Express Online* again stands out because of its low number of unique commentators compared to the other newspapers. In other words, while only 67 (11%) unique commentators produced 600 comments on *Express Online*, it took 491 (82%) unique commentators on *Mail Online* to produce the same number of comments.<sup>156</sup>

**Table 18.** Unique commentators per newspaper

Newspaper	Comments n=	Unique commentators n=	% of unique commentators
<i>Mail Online</i>	600	491	82%
<i>Sun Online</i>	600	455	76%
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	600	442	74%
<i>Guardian Online</i>	600	348	58%
<i>Express Online</i>	600	67	11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,000</b>	<b>1,803</b>	<b>n.a.</b>

<sup>155</sup> The extended corpus was collected during the same period as the smaller corpus.

<sup>156</sup> It needs to be added here that *Mail Online* has a restriction of 10 contributions per user per day. This may also increase the number of unique users.



Based on this finding, I hypothesize that the chances are higher that this smaller group of participants may encounter each other repeatedly in the various discussion threads. As a result, they may get to know each other more easily and thus start to engage in more interactive discussions. This contrasts with *Mail Online*, *Sun Online* and *Telegraph Online* where such a bonding among participants is less likely because of the much higher number of unique commentators. The content analysis across the newspapers also supports this hypothesis. Commentators on *Express Online* provide linguistic hints that show that friendships had developed among various commentators. Others comment on previous negative encounters.

Overall, this underlines the argument that technology is not necessarily responsible for the level of interaction, but the establishment of a small CofP may be responsible for more interactive discussions or the engagement in conflicts. Further analysis of the *Express Online* data set also revealed that only 14 unique users produced the 125 comments which were part of conflictive exchanges. Participants thus knew each other from previous conflictive encounters. With one exception, 13 of these 14 users who engaged in conflictive exchanges were also among the most frequent commentators in the overall data set of 600 comments.

Last, contrary to expectations, in reader response sections the possible levels of interaction appear to be independent of the asynchronous nature to some extent. One could assume that the asynchronous nature of this form of communication lowers the chances of interaction by default since commentators are not necessarily always present at the speech event at the same time and thus may also not react immediately. Therefore, I checked the average production time between the first and 50<sup>th</sup> comment in all discussion threads which were analysed for conflictive sequences.

Despite the fact that conflicts stretch over a longer period of time on *Express Online*, they are more interactive than on the other newspapers. In other words, contrary to the assumption that, in an argument, people would post a heated reaction right away, on *Express Online* users often only do so after a certain period of time. On average 24 hours and 35 minutes passed between participants producing the first and the 50<sup>th</sup> comment in a discussion thread (Table 19). In one extreme case on *Express Online*, a thread that includes the longest conflictive sequence of 19 moves developed over a period of almost 50 hours.

**Table 19.** Average production time for a discussion thread

Newspaper	Comments n=	Ø production time	standard deviation
<i>Mail Online</i>	50	1 h 49 min	1 h 02 min
<i>Guardian Online</i>	50	1 h 56 min	1 h 52 min
<i>Sun Online</i>	50	5 h 38 min	2 h 41 min
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	50	9 h 56 min	6 h 20 min
<i>Express Online</i>	50	24 h 35 min	15 h 44 min

*Express Online*'s production time stands in stark contrast to the other news sites. Despite the fact that, for example, *Guardian Online*'s average production time is below 2 hours it displays a less interactive conflict conversation structure. In other words, despite the fact that commentators are almost 12 times faster to produce 50 comments than on *Express Online*, it does not increase the level of interaction among commentators in a conflictive exchange. Put differently, as data from *Express Online* illustrates, the factor of asynchrony is not necessarily responsible for a decreased level of interaction in conflictive exchanges.

#### 4.6. Personal attacks: Introduction, method and analytical categories

(46) AHEM) Istbattilongunner, you really have no pride, You love the French more than the English in your side. I dislike posters like you, you insult where I am from, So go to hell and move to where you belomb.

(*Sun Online*, September 07, 2009, "Bilic\_keep\_it\_shut\_0024")

Personal attacks, remarks that attack a person directly or indirectly rather than their arguments, are a common tool in argumentative discourse. As example (46) illustrates commentators of often fundamentally different views also make use of this strategy in heated and conflictive reader response debates. While personal attacks may be effective to "score points" in a conflictive exchange, they can pose powerful threats to users who may experience them as very damaging to their face. Newspapers such as the *Guardian Online* or *Telegraph Online* also make it quite clear in their netiquette rules that they do not tolerate personal abuse (see also section 3.8.3). Personal attacks in reader responses are therefore violations of the situational norms of appropriateness and thus may attract evaluations of impoliteness by the targets of the attack or even other participants. Given their damaging status, they provide a useful concept to understand and analyse the dynamics of impoliteness in this activity type.

In my methodological approach I was inspired by Walton (1998),<sup>157</sup> Kienpointner (2008) as well as Culpeper (1996). Walton's (1998) framework provides suitable categories to identify personal attacks in argumentative discourse. In argumentation theory, personal attack arguments are also known as *argumentum ad hominem*. Walton argues that *ad hominem* arguments receive their pragmatic force in discourse by discrediting a person during an argument rather than focusing on the content of a debate i.e. the quality of a person's arguments. Walton (1998:xiii) explains that these personal attacks are powerful accusations that undermine a person's honesty, trustworthiness and ultimately their credibility in argumentative discourse (i.e. in Spencer-Oatey's (e.g. 2008) conceptualisation these would mainly count as threat to the quality face of a person; cf. section 3.4):

Indeed, personal attack on an arguer's character can make him look dishonest and untrustworthy or illogical and confused. The resulting lack of credibility can make it impossible for the person to carry on effectively to defend his side of the disputed issue at all. A reputation can be stained by a drastic and colourful allegation because the powerful stigma of the accusation itself is such that the critical faculties of the audience are suspended, leaving a residue of doubt and mistrust, even though little or no verifiable evidence supporting the charge was brought forward by the accuser.

According to Walton (1998:112, emphasis in original) the logic structure of a *generic ad hominem* argument implies the following:

*a* is a bad person.

Therefore *a*'s argument *a* should not be accepted.

The *generic ad hominem* can be divided further. The negative *ethotic ad hominem* undermines a person's honesty and trustworthiness by implying that a person has a bad character for veracity, prudent judgment, perception of the situation and reasoning or moral standards. A *circumstantial ad hominem* attack refers to inconsistencies in a person's line of argumentation and can be described as "You don't practice what you preach". The *bias ad hominem* questions a person's honesty by insinuating that a person is too biased to be a credible discussion partner in a debate.

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<sup>157</sup> For a more recent but similar treatment of the personal attack argument see also Walton, Reed, & Macagno (2008).

Because of these characteristics, argumentation theorists have repeatedly pointed out the insulting character such personal attack arguments may carry (cf. Walton 1998). Kienpointner (2008), who studied impoliteness in relation to emotional arguments suggests that *ad hominem* attacks, i.e. personal attack arguments especially in regard to the person's physical and mental state have a tendency to be considered face threatening and thus impolite in certain contexts. In any case such personal attacks always also implicitly demonstrate a lack of respect for and degradation of one's opponent. In Spencer-Oatey's conceptualisation (e.g. 2008), a lack of respect is mainly an infringement of a person's association rights (cf. section 3.4). When it becomes clear that the target of a personal attack is also not taken seriously, this is also an infringement of the equity rights of a person. In most cases it is hard to refute a personal attack with any kind of arguments. This circumstance increases the pragmatic force of the personal attack. It can also be argued that whoever utters such judgmental personal attacks, he/she implicitly also disassociates (cf. also Culpeper 1996) himself/herself from the other person. In other words, by claiming, for example, that a person lacks cognitive skills, the speaker creates the idea of a benchmark of normal and desired personal characteristics and further implies that the accuser does not lack such skills. In Spencer-Oatey's framework (e.g. 2008) (cf. section 3.4) such an attack would then not only be a threat to a person's quality face but again also an infringement of the person's association right. In summary, personal attacks are primarily threats to the quality face of a person but also indirectly form an infringement of the sociality rights of a person (i.e. equity and association rights).

Walton (1998:xi) further explains that these types of argument are frequently used strategies during a debate of controversial or polarized topics where "interests are threatened and emotions are running high on the issue". Since reader responses are a form of online argumentative discourse in which participants display a controversial pool of opinions and discussions get emotionally charged, it is not surprising that they are characteristic of reader response discourse.

Importantly, personal attacks in this study go beyond a mere argumentative disagreement among commentators in regard to the topic of a discussion thread but are understood as any direct or indirect attack that degrade a person. Building on Walton's (1998) classification and considering the data at hand, the following categories were established. These categories allow a study of *ad hominem* attacks systematically from a face work/impoliteness perspective:

1. You are morally, ethically or socially deficient
2. Your perception is distorted
3. Your cognitive capabilities are deficient
4. Your prudential judgement is deficient
5. You are not truthful
6. You are inconsistent
7. You are biased

A bottom-up analysis revealed that additional categories were necessary for other types of attacks that were frequent in the data and may also be understood as personal attacks in a broader sense of the concept. These are:

8. You are a joke (adapted from Culpeper 1996)
9. You lack discussion manners
10. You are not worth being listened to (adapted from Culpeper 1996)
11. Watch it! (Threats and warnings)
12. Unclassified moderated attacks<sup>158</sup>

Though I am going to introduce each category one by one in the following section, these strategies do not always occur in isolation in the data. In other words, a comment may include different types of personal attacks. There are also conceptual overlaps for some categories. While the strategy “You are not truthful” has been established as a separate category, it can also be viewed as a specific sub-type of the first strategy “You are morally, ethically, or socially deficient”. After all, truthfulness in a person can also be viewed as a moral value. Nevertheless, it appeared useful for the type of data at hand to establish an individual category for this character dimension. Especially from the perspective of journalists, truthfulness is a core value in their ethical code of their profession (cf. The Guardian’s Editorial Code 2007). Therefore, this dimension was viewed as an independent category. For a categorization that specifically focuses on attacks on journalists see the pilot study discussed in Neurauter-Kessels (2011). Also, personal attacks regarding the cognitive capabilities of a person may be linked to attacks regarding the distorted perception of a person. In other words, if a person does not have sufficient cognitive skills, this may

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<sup>158</sup> This category includes comments with attacks that the newspaper’s moderators had deleted (i.e. moderated) since they did not adhere to the netiquette standards (cf. section 4.6.12). Since the precise content of these comments is not known they are unclassified in terms of personal attacks used.

also impair their perception of things. Nevertheless, I always tried to establish the main argumentative weight of a personal attack for categorization purposes. Sections of the data analysis were also independently verified by another linguist, and in cases of disagreement a joint decision was made. Future research may also prove that these categories could be refined and subdivided into further types of personal attacks.

While impoliteness evaluations will differ from person to person, it is hypothesized that participants might experience some types of personal attacks as more face threatening than others. One could argue that a personal attack of the “inconsistency” type is less face threatening than for example an attack on the moral character of a user in this context. Also, journalists may experience different types of personal attacks as more severe than others because of their public role and as representatives of a newspaper. Here possibly a personal attack regarding the truthfulness or objectivity<sup>159</sup> of a journalist is more detrimental than attacks regarding their prudential judgement. Nevertheless, these thoughts remain speculations. After all, in practice it will always depend on the individual situation and on what kind of personal values and face considerations are most important or most sensitive for the respective participants (i.e. see Spencer-Oatey 2008:21 for her definition of the concept of “face sensitivities”).

In the following, I will define and discuss the twelve types of personal attacks identified in the data starting with the most frequent category based on Walton’s framework (personal attacks 1. – 7. above). I then continue with the discussion of the broader types (personal attacks 8. – 11. above), which were also identified in my data. Again the order of discussion will be based on frequency except for the discussion of unclassified moderated attacks (strategy 12. above), which will be considered last. I will also briefly explain the face threatening potential of the different types of personal attacks from Spencer-Oatey’s point of view. However, in general I will not make such a fine-grained distinction as Spencer-Oatey does and just work with the broad concept of face and face threats (see section 3.4 for a discussion thereof).

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<sup>159</sup> Then again, columnists may experience personal attacks of the type “bias” as less face threatening since they are supposed to engage in “opinion brokering” to stir readers (Conboy 2007:87) and commentary is subjective and evaluative by nature as Burger claims (2005:215). However, objectivity in news reporting overall is limited despite its ethical value for the profession (Conboy 2007:19ff.).

To recapitulate, reader response commentators<sup>160</sup> used these types of personal attacks in their postings to offend co-commentators and journalists, and in some cases the newspaper. Attacks against moderators were also tracked, but not a single instance occurred. Personal attacks against key actors in articles were not traced since they are not part of the immediate communicative situation of reader responses. Therefore, it is hard to argue that they may feel offended since it's very unlikely that they ever read the comments. Also since this section is closely linked to the previous analysis of conflict development and key actors are not active commentators in this context, it was also not accounted for systematically in this section. However, see section 4.8.2 for a case study on name-calling of key actors on *Sun Online*.

#### 4.6.1. *You are morally, ethically or socially deficient*

This type of personal attack is arguably the most general *ad hominem* attack and poses a potential face threat towards an interlocutor by implying that the person has a morally, ethically or otherwise socially person-inherent trait that is deficient and therefore unacceptable. This type of personal attack is thus primarily a threat to the quality face of a person in Spencer-Oatey's (e.g. 2008) conceptualisation. The following character flaws were highlighted by the attacker to discredit another person: If an attacker did not declare a person generally amoral, attackers, for example, highlighted that a person was considered unfair, patronizing, unethical, without manners, self-centred, cowardly, arrogant, irresponsible, without integrity, inhuman, jealous, inconsiderate, ignorant, narrow-minded, a traitor, immature or simply malicious. In the following I will illustrate this multi-dimensional category by means of three illustrative examples: In the first example a person discredits another as being completely amoral, in the second example a commentator degrades others for their apparent show of jealousy and in the last example for their cowardice.

Example (47) is an interaction between a commentator and the journalist on *Telegraph Online*. Admittedly, this is a special case because here the journalist is not a representative of the newspaper but the former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown. In the article the prime minister shared his view on the future of global economics. Following the article, user "Cllr Jeremy Zeid" personally attacks Gordon Brown with

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<sup>160</sup> Users and journalists can both be commentators. However, there was only one instance on *Guardian Online* where a journalist actively commented and personally attacked other commentators in an attempt to defend his own face.

the claim that Brown lacks any moral standards whatsoever. This argument implies that the user does not consider the prime minister a credible nor respectable figure: *you are nothing but a hollow cipher, a vacuous scratched record with a “moral compass” so demagnetized that it points everywhere and nowhere*. Being accused of a lack of any “moral compass” poses a severe face threat to the prime minister. The user underlines his personal attack by calling Brown names (*a hollow cipher, a vacuous scratched record*). In fact, calling him a *vacuous scratched record* is also a personal attack on the cognitive capabilities of Gordon Brown (see section 4.6.3).

(47) I am pleasede that the Telegraph have given you this column, because perhaps those who may have given you the benefit of the doubt will see and read that you are nothing but a hollow cipher, a vacuous scratched record with a “moral compass” so demagnetized that it points everywhere and nowhere as whim dictates.[...]

(*Telegraph Online*, September 18, 2009, “A\_new\_era\_of\_global\_economic\_0021”)

Example (48) is taken from a discussion thread on the article “Bloated Bride of Wildenstein looks more frightening than ever”. In the article the journalist talks about Jocelyn Wildenstein, who is famous for her numerous and extreme plastic surgeries that made her appearance look very unnatural. In the press she is often called the “Bride of Wildenstein” as a reference to the bride of Frankenstein. In the article, the author notes that despite her looks, she had a date with a handsome looking man. In the consecutive discussion thread almost all commentators comment on the appearance of Jocelyn Wildenstein and ridicule her in the most extreme form. Thereupon user “Dione” personally attacks her co-commentators by claiming that they are just not credible because they are driven by jealousy. Implicit in this attack is the attacker’s judgement that jealousy is not a desirable character trait in a person. User “Dione” presumes that other commentators are just not beautiful enough themselves (old and fat) to get a handsome looking man.

(48) Bring on the nasty commentaries , jealous pudgy women!!! You can only wish to have such beautiful ,wrinkle-free skin at her age and get such a handsome man to go out with you !Unfortunately that will never happen

(*Mail Online*, September 17, 2009, “Bloated\_Bride\_0049”)

“Dione’s” comment triggers 15 reactions. Some wonder whether she was really serious other whether she just wanted to be sarcastic. Given the context, one could also consider whether this is troll-like behaviour and “Dione” just wanted to test how



many reactions she would get with her comment. However, since there is no further evidence from “Dione” (she only commented once) this hypothesis remains speculative. Others are of the opinion that she is serious and counter attack her. These counter attacks also indicate that people apparently felt offended by her personal attack.

The last example for this type of personal attack is part of a comment thread on US-President Barack Obama. One of the topics discussed in this thread is Obama’s healthcare reform. User “Ethereal” apparently does not agree with a number of previous posters and attacks them personally by claiming that they are just cowards:

(49) [...] Hiding behind your computers like cowards with nothing else better to do than talk to yourselves about nothing. You HAVE NO SOLUTIONS TO THE CURRENT CRISIS OF HEALTHCARE. [...]

(*Telegraph Online*, September 17, 2009, “Does\_white\_America\_hate\_Barack\_0043”)

User “Ethereal” implies that it easy to come up with suggestions when one is just sitting behind a computer. However, “Ethereal” considers their discussion a waste of time since they have no solution for the healthcare crisis. With this face threatening accusation he/she clearly disassociates him/herself from the previous posters. His/her use of capital letters can either be a sign of a heightened emotional arousal or a matter of emphasis to underline his core argument.

#### 4.6.2. *Your perception is distorted*

This type of personal attack is of a more specific nature than the previous attack and arguably poses a less severe potential face threat compared to the previous type. Nevertheless, it is a very frequent and powerful face threatening strategy used by participants in reader response debates to discredit an opponent. Walton (1998:216) defines this personal attack argument as follows:

The negative ethotic argument from perception is not just an accusation that an arguer is biased or ignorant but that he has failed to take the kind of information into account that is needed for intelligent and informed argument in the type of dialogue he is supposed to be taking part in.

By means of such a personal attack, an interlocutor in a reader response debate implies that another person’s perception is distorted and therefore the person is not to be taken seriously as a discussion partner (i.e. attack on the quality face, infringement of equity rights). In detail this attack implies that the attacked does not have the

capabilities or made a conscious effort to properly and sufficiently take evidence or facts into consideration to act as a reasonable and credible discussion partner. This category includes instances of people who accuse others of not properly interpreting what journalists or previous discussion partners posted or that commentators have not carefully read the previous comments or the article. In other cases, commentators argue that participants are not be taken seriously (i.e. infringement on equity rights) as they are simply missing to take certain facts into consideration and thus demonstrate a lack of knowledge. Ultimately, this personal attack also implies that a discussant's lack of or deficient perception leads to a misjudgement in their views of matters and that they are consequently not a (serious) expert that one should pay attention to. One could argue, that in a way their right to talk about the matter is questioned in these attacks (i.e. an indirect infringement of a person's equity rights). All of the above elements contribute to the face threatening potential of this type of attack. Frequently, attackers will not just attack the person but also justify why they think their opponent has a bad character for perception by means of counter evidence. Often such attacks are realised by means of challenging questions (Bousfield 2008a:132–134) to reveal the misperception of the opponent. According to Bousfield, challenging questions, as a device themselves, are already face threatening because they implicitly criticise the attacked person.

Example (50) illustrates a personal attack that questions the perception of another commentator in regard to the reasons for a riot of Arsenal fans following a soccer game. Commentator “19soon”, an Arsenal fan, attacks “DaveDownUnder”, a fan from the opposing soccer team, by arguing that she/he does not properly perceive the facts that led to a riot of Arsenal fans and is therefore not to be taken seriously as a discussion partner. “19soon” uses a challenging question to underline the misperception of his/her opponent. *DaveDownUnder... Do you think the Arsenal supporters would have acted like they did if Ronald McDonald hadn't run 80 yards to celebrate in front of them?* The attack is meant to disqualify “DaveDownUnder” as an appropriate judge of the situation. “19soon” further argues that “DaveDownUnder” is not capable of properly perceiving the situation since she/he is not objectively judging the situation: *When you look into it make sure you take your BLINKERS OFF!!* Actually, this remark could also be interpreted as a personal attack of the type “bias” (see section 4.6.7). User “19soon” basically implies that “DaveDownUnder” cannot properly perceive and judge the situation because he is biased as a fan of the opposing

soccer club. Such a face threat is especially powerful since it is hard to refute with any kind of argument.

(50) DaveDownUnder... Do you think the Arsenal supporters would have acted like they did if Ronald McDonald hadn't run 80 yards to celebrate in front of them? Ask yourself the question mate is that a possibility you might be interested looking into!!!! When you look into it make sure you take your BLINKERS OFF!!

(*Sun Online*, September 18, 2009, "Adebayor\_Why\_I\_lost\_it\_0040")

Example (51) is another illustration for a personal attack of the type "perception" during an interaction between the commentator "Karen D" and the journalist Simon Heffer on the article titled "The gulf between a Princess and a Queen". In the article Simon Heffer compares the lives of the late Queen Elizabeth (the late Queen Mother) with Diana, the Princess of Wales. This example is especially interesting because while "Karen D" accuses the journalist of an incorrect or insufficient consideration of facts and thus a deficient perception of the situation, it is actually "Karen D" who demonstrates a lack of knowledge and thus a misjudgement of the situation. "Karen D" starts off by a number of challenging questions to cast doubt on the journalist's credibility as a discussion partner. *Am I missing something here???? The "Late" Queen Elizabeth ??? What are you talking about Simon Heffer? When did she die I would have thought it would have been mentioned on the news. Or are we talking about Queen Elizabeth the first??* She/he continues with counter evidence that she/he thinks proves the journalist's misperception of the situation. *Charles is Queen Elizabeth's Son not grandson. And Diana was her Daughter in Law NOT grand-daughter in law ??* In the end she/he rebukes him with the line: *Good God. Get your facts right before spouting forth such rubbish.* Her/his negative evaluation of the journalist is underlined by her use of swearing (*Good god*) and expressions with strong negative connotations (i.e. *spouting, rubbish*). This last remark also questions the journalist's right to talk about the matter.

(51) Am I missing something here???? The "Late" Queen Elizabeth ??? What are you talking about Simon Heffer? When did she die I would have thought it would have been mentioned on the news. Or are we talking about Queen Elizabeth the first?? Charles is Queen Elizabeth's Son not grandson. And Diana was her Daughter in Law NOT grand-daughter in law ?? Good God. Get your facts right before spouting forth such rubbish.

(*Telegraph Online*, September 20, 2009, "The\_gulf\_between\_a\_Princess\_0015")

In summary, “Karen D’s” personal attack arguably proves less face threatening to the journalist since it is actually her/him who demonstrates a deficient perception of the evidence at hand. Ultimately, she/he is embarrassing herself/himself as a number of consecutive posters point out to her in no uncertain terms.

#### 4.6.3. *Your cognitive capabilities are deficient*

This type of attack specifically discredits the cognitive capabilities of a participant. The attack implies that a participant lacks or has deficient cognitive capabilities and that therefore a person’s logical reasoning is impaired (i.e. a threat to a person’s quality face). Ultimately, by means of this face threat a person is no longer taken seriously as a trustful and credible discussion partner (i.e. an infringement of a person’s equity rights). It often involves an explicit negative evaluation of the person’s cognitive skills (e.g. *stupid, ignorant* etc.):

(52) Some people on here are so stupid!

(*Sun Online*, September 09, 2009, “Joy\_as\_kop\_fan\_0039”)

(53) What an ignorant comment Birdmaniw.

(*Sun Online*, September 09, 2009, “Joy\_as\_kop\_fan\_0037”)

Frequently, users would offend other commentators or journalists by claiming that their posts are not logically reasonable but just *nonsense, rubbish or bullshit*. Other attackers would claim that a participant was removed from reality and fantasizing or that an issue was simply beyond a person’s mental capabilities to understand. A few also claimed that some lacked sufficient education to be talking about a matter. This strategy is to some extent linked to the strategy regarding perception discussed in section 4.6.2 because a lack of cognitive skills also automatically discredits a person from being rationally able to perceive a situation properly or sufficiently. Nevertheless, here the main weight of the personal attack is on the negative judgment of a person’s sanity and intelligence. Example (54) introduced in section 4.4.1 (see example (32) for contextual information) illustrates the personal attack on cognitive skills clearly. User “Auric” attacks the journalist’s cognitive skills by calling him *dim-witted* and reinforces the attack by evaluating the journalist’s competence of his mother-tongue as less than that of a non-native English speaker. Finally, “Auric” challenges the journalist with her/his rhetorical question *How would you use that verb? ‘I am discriminated’ etc.* to further ridicule the journalist’s language skills.

He/she adds emphasis to his/her resentment by means of swearing at the end of his/her post: *FFS*.

(54) <quote> Smokers are now New York's most discriminated minority </quote>  
Even by the Graun's standards, awful English and clearly not written by  
an educated foreigner, but a dim-witted native speaker. How would you  
use that verb? 'I am discriminated' etc.  
FFS

(*Guardian Online*, September 18, 2009, "Smokers\_0016")

Example (55) is a face threat uttered by user "Ossiel23" towards his/her co-commentators. He/she discredits the cognitive capabilities of the other participants by implying that they must have less than *half a brain* since they are *talking rubbish*.

(55) Some terrible comments here. Anyone with half a brain knows he is  
innocent. Wait til the full story comes out before talking rubbish.[...]

(*Sun Online*, September 09, 2009, "Joy\_as\_kop\_fan\_0016")

Example (56) illustrates a personal attack that discredits the cognitive skills of previous participants while at the same time also implying that this "handicap" does not allow the users to properly take facts into consideration in order to act as a reasonable and credible discussion partners. User "PompeyLiz2" claims that if they had taken the evidence at hand into consideration, they would also not have made unwise comments.

(56) READ THE FACTS before you make stupid comments about something you know  
nothing about. Michael Shields was wrongly imprisoned at 18. Jack Straw  
could have released him last December - the evidence was there to see.

(*Sun Online*, September 09, 2009, "Joy\_as\_kop\_fan\_0050")

#### 4.6.4. *Your prudential judgement is deficient*

This type of attack specifically discredits the prudential judgement of a person. With this strategy a participant implicates that the attacked person does not demonstrate sensible behaviour or judgment or lacks sufficient foresight to act wisely and competently (i.e. a threat to a person's quality face). This strategy is conceptually linked to the strategy discussed in section 4.6.2 regarding the distorted perception of a person as this personal attack also implies that a person's deficient prudential judgement disqualifies him/her to talk about a matter and discredits them as a serious discussion partner (i.e. an infringement of a person's equity rights). A lack in

perception may also affect prudential judgement. In my data, most of the occurrences of this strategy were triggered by an article written by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown in which he shares his views on the future of the global economy. A number of users accuse him of insufficient leadership that apparently led the UK's economy into a crisis. User "Kenneth Armitage" literally accuses Gordon Brown of a lack of prudent judgement following his suggestions for the economic future of Great Britain:

(57) Reading between the lines all this tripe tells me is that the UK is in for a very difficult set of economic conditions for the next 2 years perhaps even longer, that the number of people without paid employment will remain high because we have exported our industrial and manufacturing base and even parts of the service sector to India and China, that we have become increasingly reliant on importing all forms of manufactured products to meet demand and therefore the trade deficit will increase because we have nothing to offset it, and that belt-tightening, apart from bankers and politicians, will be the order of the day for the foreseeable future. Who on earth suggested that Gordon Brown was a prudent chancellor?

(*Telegraph Online*, September 18, 2009, "A\_new\_era\_of\_global\_economic\_0028")

After sharing his/her thoughts on why he/she does not think that Brown's suggestions are sensible he/she ends with the rhetorical question: *Who on earth suggested that Gordon Brown was a prudent chancellor?* Such a face threatening accusation automatically discredits Brown as a trustful, credible or competent person. User "Rick Hamilton" also accuses Brown of a lack of prudential judgement in his handling of the British economy and depicts him as a total failure in regard to prudential leadership as head of the Labour party:

(58) Many will be pleased to see that you intend not to reward failure. Labour bankrupted the UK in 1951 and did it again in 1979, going cap in hand to the IMF. You are personally responsible for supervision of our economy over the last 12 years and we have ended up with yet another financial disaster under Labour.[...]

(*Telegraph Online*, September 18, 2009, "A\_new\_era\_of\_global\_economic\_0027")

Example (59) is an interaction between "scottyboy1966" and "amii500" on *Sun Online* discussing the right to kill an animal called the "Mystery beast" by *Sun Online* which had apparently attacked four youngsters at a lake side. The article says that in an attempt to defend themselves the youngsters had apparently killed the animal with stones. "amii500" strongly disapproves of the children's action arguing that their

behaviour is typical of humankind who destroy anything that is new or incomprehensible. Thereupon “scottyboy1966” attacks “amii500” arguing that he/she lacks prudent judgement in condemning the youngsters, who just reacted out of fear. He/she wants to demonstrate his/her lack of judgment by questioning what he/she would have done in their stead. “2scottyboy1966’s” suggestion to offer *a cup of tea and a biscuit* is obviously meant to ridicule “amii500” and discredit him/her as a serious and credible discussion partner.

(59) And what would you have done amii500 when you saw it running after you, offer it a cup of tea and a biscuit?

(*Sun Online*, September 17, 2009, “Mystery\_beast\_0020”)

#### 4.6.5. *You are not truthful*

This type of personal face threatening attack is a specific sub-category of the more general *ad hominem* attack regarding the moral character of a person (cf. section 4.6.1). With this powerful face threat the interlocutor implies that a person is not truthful (i.e. attack on a person’s quality face) and consequently cannot be considered a credible and trustable person. Ultimately, dishonesty in a discussion partner can be considered a morally deficient character-trait. In my data, participants were often accused of being hypocritical or deceitful in their actions or way of argumentation. Participants often argued that people pretended something they knew was not the truth. On occasion users claimed that participants selectively and purposefully held back information to fit their argumentation.

In the article by Gordon Brown on *Telegraph Online* a number of users accuse him of dishonesty during his political career as example (60) illustrates. User “Fawsten Gayle” questions the overall credibility of Gordon Brown:

(60) Quite frankly Mr Brown, I do not believe a word you write or speak.

(*Telegraph Online*, September 18, 2009, “A\_new\_era\_of\_global\_economic\_0007”)

Also user “P. Lucas” questions Gordon’s Brown truthful character (next to questioning his overall capabilities as a politician):

(61) Another few months to go with this incompetent hypocrit.

(*Telegraph Online*, September 18, 2009, “A\_new\_era\_of\_global\_economic\_0038”)

Since it is very hard to refute such an accusation it proves a powerful face threatening attack.

Example (62) is a more indirect example of an attack on the truthful character of a person. Here user “stoneshepherd” argues with user “VoltaireRules” about the true reasons for former President George W. Bush to invade Iraq with the US military. He/she implies that “VoltaireRules” just wants to remember what fits her/his argument with the line: *Short and/or selective memory methinks*. He/she supports the attack by providing evidence to show “VoltaireRules” selective memory: *err don't you remember? the Iraqis were supposed to greet their liberators ...*

(62) VoltaireRules  
 <quote>  
 If it was about stealing there resources the USA wuld have to steal all  
 the oil for the next 50 years and even then it would not have covered  
 the cost.  
 </quote>  
 err don't you remember? the Iraqis were supposed to greet their  
 liberators with cheering and flowers - it was supposed to be over in  
 three weeks, George believed the script so much he even declared  
 victory.  
 Short and/or selective memory methinks LOL

(Guardian Online, September 19, 2009, “Why\_I\_threw\_0032”)

#### 4.6.6. *You are inconsistent*

Walton describes three types of personal attacks in this category. Nevertheless, they all bottom line imply that a person contradicts themselves either through their actions or their line of argumentation. Since such attacks question the credibility and trustworthiness of a person they can be considered face threatening (i.e. attack on a person's quality face). Arguably, they may be considered less severe than the previously discussed strategies, but again that will depend on the face sensitivities of the respective individual. The generic *ad hominem* of this type could be described as “You don't practice what you preach”. Walton (1998:218ff.) divides this kind of *ad hominem* attack into three categories: personal attacks regarding the pragmatic, logic or situational inconsistencies. The *pragmatic inconsistency ad hominem* implies that there is an inconsistency between a person's actions and a person's “verbal moves”. Walton (1998:112, emphasis in original) sums this category up as follows “You say one thing, do another”. The *logic inconsistency ad hominem* is a personal attack that implies that a person contradicts themselves in their “verbal moves” (Walton 1998:221). The *situational inconsistency ad hominem* implies that a person does not have the right to speak on an issue because of their personal situation. The subdivision



of this type of personal attack goes beyond the needs of this study since all three types have the same aim from a face threat perspective, namely to discredit an opponent as a credible discussion partner. As such, it is a form of impolite criticism towards the person and is a common strategy in any form of debate. As indicated, they may be experienced as less powerful face threats compared to direct personal attacks on the cognitive, moral or perceptual character of a person. While inconsistencies in one person's actions or verbal moves do not attack a core character trait of a person directly, attacks on the cognitive, moral or perceptual character of a person do so very strongly. Nevertheless, such attacks of the "inconsistency" type may also implicitly display a person as a hypocritical (cf. also Walton 1998).

Example (63) illustrates a personal attack regarding an inconsistency between a participant's actions and her/his arguments. This example is taken from an ongoing conflict between "Welsh\_Dragon" and "Hookit58". In a previously posted comment "Hookit58" claimed that "Welsh\_Dragon" did not have any "standards" in regard to his/her conduct during debate. "Welsh\_Dragon" counters with a personal attack of the inconsistency type:

(63) [...] As for your reference to "standards". How can someone who anticipates in blood sports, and who repeatedly attempts to defend a lying immoral and criminal government claim to have any "standards"?

(*Express Online*, September 08, 2009, "Is\_there\_too\_much\_swearing\_0029")

"Welsh\_Dragon" implies that "Hookit58's" actions (fondness of blood sports, support for the British government) disqualify him/her as a credible person to make any claims about a lack of personal moral standards in another person. "Welsh\_Dragon" basically claims that since "Hookit58" demonstrates through his/her actions that he/she does not have any personal standards himself/herself, "Hookit58's" accusation is unfounded and proves him/her to be hypocritical. Interestingly, following this attack "Hookit58" counter attacks "Welsh\_Dragon" again to defend his/her own face by means of the same type of personal attack.

Example (64) is taken from an interaction between user "formerlefty" and the journalist Sunny Hundal. In his article Hundal discusses the British political party's (BNP) planned appearance on BBC's Question Time. One of his arguments is that it is a myth that "[T]he BNP's arguments can be defeated through rational argument" and that voters therefore will not be convinced to turn away from the BNP by means

of rational arguments. “formerlefty” uses a personal attack of the inconsistency type to imply that if Hundal really believes his own argument, it would not be necessary to publish a piece to rationalize why BNP voters are not open to rational arguments. This attack is an indirect impolite criticism on the journalist’s pronounced opinion and his actions. Ultimately this attack is meant to hurt the journalist’s credibility.

(64) Your point 1 though does indeed seem self-contradictory - if rational argument can't change minds, why are you bothering to write this?

(*Guardian Online*, September 07, 2009, “The\_BNP\_doesnt\_deserve\_0009”)

#### 4.6.7. *You are biased*

This type of personal face threatening attack implies that a person is too biased to be credible or trustworthy in their line of argumentation (i.e. a threat to a person’s quality face). Such attacks included accusations that due to people’s bias, they were not open to other people’s arguments and views or that the comments of some participants were just typical of the behaviour one could expect from a biased person. Interestingly, this attack was one of the least used types in the data set. In example (65) Croatian soccer team supporter “tranch” accuses Manchester United fans of an inherent bias in their evaluation of the soccer players’ behaviour. The request to take *them rose tinted spectacles off* suggests that Manchester United fans are clearly less critical of their own soccer players’ misconduct (i.e. *cheating*) during football games compared to their judgment of soccer players from opposing teams. This personal attack questions all previous Manchester commentators as trustful discussion partners (i.e. in this case we can also argue that a threat to the commentators’ group identity face takes place).

(65) i suggest taking them rose tinted spectacles off next time b4 u comment on cheating articles

(*Sun Online*, September 07, 2009, “Bilic\_keep\_it\_shut\_0038”)

Example (66) is again taken from the conflict between “Welsh\_Dragon” and “Hockit58”. In this example “Welsh\_Dragon” accuses “Hockit58” of biased behaviour for the sake of making some point. This attack also includes an attack on the truthfulness (see section 4.6.5) of “Hockit58” since “Welsh\_Dragon” implies that his/her biased point of view triggers “Hockit58” into distorting the truth value of facts

for his/her own ends. The example also includes the accusation that “Hookit58’s” behaviour is predictable.

(66) [...] But of course, the politically correct holier than thou looney left, as expected, seize upon anything they can possibly misrepresent in order to attempt to score some imaginary “point”. [...]

(*Express Online*, September 08, 2009, “Is\_there\_too\_much\_swearing\_0029”)

#### 4.6.8. *You are a joke (condescend and ridicule)*

This type of personal attack includes different forms of condescending and ridiculing attacks that could not be assigned to any of the other specific attacks on the character of a person. While many of the previously mentioned attacks include elements that could be described as a display of condescending behaviour (e.g. examples (47), (48), (51), (54) etc.), most of the attacks in this category share the common trait that a participant treats others in a condescending way by means of ridicule. In other words, offenders do not attack a specific character trait of a participant but use a general attack that is purely meant to ridicule the other participant’s personal value. This type of personal attack is thus primarily an infringement of the equity rights of a person. Specifically, the reciprocal right to be taken seriously by your discussion partner is violated. This type of attack clearly demonstrates a lack of respect for one’s counterpart and thus also an infringement of a person’s association rights. In my data it often appears that participants use this strategy whenever they want to ridicule a person for their own entertainment. Arguably, the face threatening effect is likely to be reinforced through the presence of an audience who is witness to this “entertainment show”. In any case, this attack makes it clear that commentators do not take the other users seriously. Sarcasm and irony are also frequently used in this context. This category is inspired by Culpeper (1996:358) strategy “Condescend, scorn or ridicule – emphasize your relative power. Be contemptuous”.

Example (67) is taken from a discussion thread on a debate regarding the legalisation of drugs. British politician Ann Widdecombe is one of the round-table members who shares her views on how the UK should deal with drugs. Widdecombe is a strong advocate of a ban on drugs and thinks that even the legalisation of soft drugs would be the wrong way forward for the UK. Thereupon, the user “KidProQuo” attacks Widdecombe by means of ridicule.

With his/her attack, “KidProQuo” demonstrates that he/she does not respect Widdecombe in her views. His/her suggestion *to make orgasms illegal* is meant to ridicule her. Obviously “KidProQuo” does not take Widdecombe seriously. This poses a potential face threat to the politician.

(67) Widdecombe would probably make orgasms illegal if she could.

(*Guardian Online*, September 20, 2009, “Leading\_voices\_0019”)

Example (68) is an exchange between “imonlysaying” and “Welsh\_Dragon” on the reasonability of swearing on TV. They are not on good terms as previous other interactions between the two indicate. In this case, “imonlysaying” reacts to a previous post by “Welsh\_Dragon” in which he/she made fun out of the whole debate by posting a tirade of swear words in his/her own comment. Thereupon, “imonlysaying” reacts with a comment that is meant to ridicule “Welsh\_Dragon”.

(68) DID YOU SAY THAT DRAGON OR WRITE IT??? MY GOD YOU HAVE  
INSULTED,UMBRAGED AND INDEED MORTIFIED THIS VERY DAY. YOUR NOT ON THE  
TELLY ARE YOU?

(*Express Online*, September 07, 2009, “Is\_there\_too\_much\_swearing\_0008”)

It is clear from the context that “imonlysaying” is not serious but rather ironic with his/her exaggerated statement: *MY GOD YOU HAVE INSULTED,UMBRAGED AND INDEED MORTIFIED THIS VERY DAY*. Obviously, he/she does not view “Welsh\_Dragon” as a serious discussion partner. The ironic rhetorical question *YOUR NOT ON THE Telly ARE YOU?* is presumably a condescending hint at “Welsh\_Dragon”. Despite her/his attempt to make fun out of the whole debate, he/she is not entertaining at all, and it is therefore a good thing that he/she is not on television.

Since most instances of this type of attack occurred on *Express Online*, example (69) is also taken from this source. In this case it is “Welsh\_Dragon” who uses the same type of personal attack to address “glen1”. They are involved in an ongoing conflict regarding their personal experiences in the British military service. Both accuse each other of lying about their active participation in the armed forces. In his/her previous comment (see <quote>) “glen1” ironically suggests that instead of a service man, “Welsh\_Dragon” must have been rather a traffic warden who wanted to proceed to a PCSO (Police Community Support Officer). Alternatively he/she

suggests that “Welsh\_Dragon” has probably not been an active soldier but has worked for the NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes) which serves as a recreational and goods delivery support unit for soldiers. Obviously, “glen1” views this as a less prestigious unit as becomes apparent from his/her condescending tone. As a result, “Welsh\_Dragon” counters with an attack that is purely meant to ridicule “glen1”: *OH DEAR THE LITTLE BOY IS THROWING HIS TOYS OUT OF THE PRAM. I BET WHILE YOU TYPED THAT YOU WERE SUCKING YOUR THUMB.*

(69) <quote>

Are you a traffic warden who would like to progress to PCSO. My gut instinct tells me you may have worked in NAAFI which would fit the present profile. (No Ambition And F.all Interest.

</quote>

OH DEAR THE LITTLE BOY IS THROWING HIS TOYS OUT OF THE PRAM. I BET WHILE YOU TYPED THAT YOU WERE SUCKING YOUR THUMB. FOR YOUR INFORMATION - AS YOU WELL KNOW - I WAS A COMMISSIONED OFFICER. I SERVED WITH MY REGIMENT INCLUDING IN NORTHERN IRELAND BEFORE MOVING ON SECONDMENT TO ANOTHER REGIMENT JUST PRIOR TO THE FALKLANDS WAR.

(Express Online, September 09, 2009, “Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0048”)

“Welsh\_Dragon’s” attempt to display “glen1” as a little sulking child, also with his/her use of *the little boy* to address “glen1” demonstrates his/her condescending attitude. The main aim of this attack is to demonstrate “Welsh\_Dragon” does not take “glen1” seriously. Interestingly, though “Welsh\_Dragon” sees the need to provide evidence for his/her active service in the British military to weaken “glen1’s” previously uttered accusations. *FOR YOUR INFORMATION - AS YOU WELL KNOW - I WAS A COMMISSIONED OFFICER. I SERVED WITH MY REGIMENT INCLUDING IN NORTHERN IRELAND [...]*. Nevertheless, all of the above examples are powerful face threats that are hard to refute in any form of reasonable debate since the discussion partners are by default not taken seriously.

#### 4.6.9. *You lack discussion manners*

This type of personal attack is used whenever a commentator wants to negatively evaluate the discussion behaviour of another poster. In other words, a commentator uses a meta-comment to basically accuse another person of a lack of discussion manners. This type is primarily an infringement of the equity rights of a person as commentators may think they are unduly ordered about. As such it is a form of impolite criticism. This strategy, maybe more obviously than other personal attack

types, demonstrates a speaker's attempt to disassociate from the target of the attack (cf. Culpeper 1996:357) and thus infringes an addressee's association rights. By criticizing another person, the criticizer implies that he/she does not lack discussion manners (Abrahams 1962). Comments in this category have also been useful from a methodological point of view. These attacks provide evidence from participants themselves in regard to when they considered something as inappropriate in this activity type. As such this category fits well into a first order impoliteness approach and helps to understand the situational norms of appropriateness.

In example (70) "Andrew Shakespeare" attacks a number of previous commentators in a discussion thread on Christianity. Specifically, "Andrew Shakespeare's" criticism is also addressed at "Pewkatchoo", who had previously attacked the journalist with an offensive comment.

(70) [...] Why is it these days that nobody can make a respectful comment on Christianity without attracting a chorus of patronising sneers? What happened to respectful disagreement?

(*Telegraph Online*, September 17, 2009, "The\_Relics\_and\_Bones\_0013")

"Andrew Shakespeare" negatively describes the behaviour of previous commentators *as a chorus of patronising sneers* and ends with a challenging rhetorical question: *What happened to respectful disagreement?* With this question he/she implies that the previous commentators were not respectful towards those commentators who do have some religious affiliation. "Andrew Shakespeare" also expresses his/her regret that commentators are apparently no longer able to disagree on issues without losing their manners. Thereby, "Andrew Shakespeare" disassociates him/herself from those he/she criticises. This attack is interesting from two perspectives. On the one hand, we have got an offender who attacks the face of others for their behaviour. On the other hand, it is actually the others who display face threatening impolite conduct in the first place that trigger "Andrew Shakespeare's" impolite rebuke of others.

Example (71) is again taken from the conflict between "glen1" and "Welsh\_Dragon" on their participation in the British army. In a previous comment (see <quote>) "glen1" addresses "CRESSY", a co-commentator, to indirectly accuse "Welsh\_Dragon" of unacceptable predictable behaviour no matter how *diplomatic*

one is.<sup>161</sup> In a counter attack “Welsh\_Dragon” also accuses “glen1” of a lack of discussion manners: *YOU SEEM VERY INSISTANT ON CONTINUING YOUR ABUSIVE POSTINGS.*

(71) <quote>

WHY BOTHER CRESSY? 04.09.09, 3:01pm Is there any point getting sucked in Cressy, no matter if you are diplomatic or defending yourself (which you needn't do). The reaction from dragon is predictable and being carried on from his previous incarnation on here. Out of interest Dragon do you know what the RACC and RAAC are? Beware anyone with military service past or present would know the answer. Clue they ARE NOT REGIMENTS!! Lol

</quote>

YOU SEEM VERY INSISTANT ON CONTINUING YOUR ABUSIVE POSTINGS.

(Express Online, September 09, 2009, “Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0031”)

With this rebuke “Welsh\_Dragon” criticises “glen1’s” manner of conduct in the ongoing discussion and evaluates the postings as *abusive* from his/her point of view. Again we have the same dynamics as explained in example (70). While “Welsh\_Dragon’s” post is a face threatening attack towards “glen1” it is actually “glen1” who displayed impolite and face attacking behaviour in the first place. It is “glen1’s” behaviour that triggers “Welsh\_Dragon’s” personal attack. In any case, such attacks may be used as powerful face threats to try and eliminate one’s opponent as a respectable discussion partner.

#### 4.6.10. *You are not worth being listened to*

This category is an adapted version of Culpeper’s (1996) strategy “Ignore, snub the other”. In my analysis I classified all personal attacks in this category whenever they directly communicated, “You are not worth being listened to.” This strategy demonstrates a form of ignorance towards an interlocutor. Therefore, it also includes instances where participants requested others to stop talking or simply wanted them to leave (i.e. the discussion, completely). Such a request automatically implies that it is not worth listening to the other participant. This type of attack is both an infringement on the association rights and equity rights of an addressee. On the one hand, an

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<sup>161</sup> “glen1’s” remark regarding “Welsh\_Dragon’s” *previous incarnation* refers to the fact that “Welsh\_Dragon’s” account had previously been shut down by moderators. There is sufficient evidence to assume that the same user came back operating with slightly different pseudonyms (i.e. “welsh\_dragon”; “welsh\_\_dragon” and “welsch\_dragon” instead of “Welsh\_Dragon”).

addressee is refused the “appropriate amount of conversational interaction” and on the other hand, they may feel unduly imposed upon if they are ordered to stop talking. Simultaneously, however, it may also be a threat to the quality face of a person. In contrast to Culpeper (1996), this category does not include by default all instances of personal attacks that do not address an interlocutor directly but in the third person. Arguably, third person addresses also demonstrate a form of ignorance towards an interlocutor, but in my analysis such occurrences were slotted in the respective category depending on the primary type of personal attack that was communicated. As also explained in section 4.3 an indirect address does not automatically imply that an interlocutor wants to actively ignore another person since communicators are well aware that the target of their offence can always be in “virtual earshot”. Let us reconsider example (22) with the two women in the fruit store. Here customer A addresses her friend Eli directly to complain about the behaviour of other customers in the shop. However, with her complaint she indirectly intends to address the targets of her accusation within earshot i.e. the customers who touched the fruits. Therefore, in this category the main focus is on personal attacks where a person wants to communicate on record that it is not “worth listening” to the other person or that it is not worth spending more time with the respective person (i.e. that the person should leave).<sup>162</sup> This categorization is irrespective of whether the target of an offence is addressed directly or indirectly.

Example (72) is an exchange between user “Madasafish” and the *Guardian* journalist George Monbiot. “Madasafish” does not at all agree with the journalist’s point of view on global warming, and after having accused him of lying about environmental facts, he/she orders Monbiot to *shut up now*. “Madasafish” also hints at previous exchanges where he/she apparently has already pointed out the same to the journalist without success: *But he will not - based on the past*.

(72) [...] If I were Mr Monbiot I would shut up now. But he will not - based on the past [...]

(*Guardian Online*, September 20, 2009, “Sceptics\_seize\_0027”)

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<sup>162</sup> This personal attack may be slightly overrepresented due to the fact that 18 occurrences were triggered in response to an article written by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown. 18 commentators actually requested Brown not only to stop talking but also to resign and to call new elections following his apparent political misconduct.



This attack poses a face threat towards the journalist since it is meant to withdraw his (journalistic) right to speak. Simultaneously it is also a devaluation of what Monbiot previously said.

Examples (73) and (74) are personal attacks where people are actually asked to leave since the respective participant apparently cannot bare their presence any longer. While example (73) is an indirect request for the journalist Geoffrey Lean to leave, example (74) is “Welsh\_Dragon’s” direct request to “hip\_hopper” *to clear off*.

(73) Bring back Charles Clover!

(*Telegraph Online*, September 09, 2009, “Climate\_change\_campaigners\_0002”)

(74) [...] NOW I SUGGEST YOU CLEAR OFF WHERE YOU MIGHT BE APPRECIATED - IF THERE IS SUCH A PLACE WHICH I VERY MUCH DOUBT - BECAUSE JERE YOUR JUST A BORE. [...]

(*Express Online*, September 18, 2009, “Should\_public\_services\_0033”)

In example (73) the indirect request to leave becomes clear once we understand that Charles Clover is actually another journalist that usually reports on the same kind of topics as Geoffrey Lean. Apparently, the user does not appreciate Geoffrey Lean’s writings and therefore wishes Charles Cover to return. By doing so, he indirectly shows his/her disapproval of Lean’s presence. Without actually saying it, he/she implies that Lean should no longer have a right to talk on the topic and leave. Example (74) is arguably an even more aggravating face attack uttered by “Welsh\_Dragon” towards his/her long-term opponent “hip\_hopper”. Not only does “Welsh\_Dragon” make it undoubtedly clear that he/she wants “hip\_hopper” to (virtually) disappear but he/she also reinforces the face threat by suggesting that there probably is not any other place/person where “hip\_hopper” would be appreciated. “Welsh\_Dragon” also provides an argument to justify the reasonability of his/her request, namely, that “hip\_hopper” is *just a bore*. In summary, this type of personal attack does not only express general disapproval of the interlocutor but is also meant to withdraw a person’s speaking rights. As such this strategy has a powerful face threatening potential.

#### 4.6.11. Watch it! (threats and warnings)

The last category was formed to capture a small number of instances where commentators actually used some form of threat or warning towards others. Threats

have arguably also a face threatening character since they impede another person's freedom of action (Brown & Levinson 1987:66). This category is comparable to Culpeper's (1996:358) strategy called "frighten – instil a belief that action detrimental to other will occur" and display primarily an infringement on equity rights as addressees may feel unduly imposed on.

In example (75) "glen1" actually threatens "Welsh\_Dragon" that it is maybe safe to accuse him/her of libel at safe distance but that "Welsh\_Dragon" should watch out if he/she shows the same kind of behaviour in front of a *real serviceman*. Implicit is the warning that something unpleasant will happen to "Welsh\_Dragon" in such a case.

(75) Go ahead and accuse me of Libel, just hope you never meet a real serviceman who recognises you for what you are.

(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009, "Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0043")

While "Welsh\_Dragon" was the recipient of a warning in example (75), in example (76) "Welsh\_Dragon" actually threatens what he calls a *gang* of four other posters whom he/she has been in conflict with over some time ("hip\_hopper", "Hookit58", "Wannabeamp" and "kingdom"). After recounting his/her experience as the victim of their harassment, he/she threatens them that he/she will see to it that their inappropriate treatment of him/her will come to an end that is likely not to be considered very pleasant by the others.

(76) QUITE SIMPLY - I WILL NOT TOLERATE BEING LIBELLED AND WHATEVER ACTION IS NECESSARY WILL BE TAKEN.

(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009, "Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0016")

Because of their face threatening potential, they have also been accounted for in my categorization scheme though they work differently from the other types of attacks. Here the power dynamics become especially crucial since the person uttering the threat or warning appears (at least on the surface) in the more powerful position having the choice to make their threat come true or make sure that something unpleasant is going to happen to the other person.

#### 4.6.12. *Unclassified moderated attacks*

This is a special category since it includes all instances of comments that were deleted because they did not adhere to the newspaper's netiquette standards. As already

mentioned, while this is an important category, data was only available on *Guardian Online*. This is the only newspaper that actually flagged deleted comments in the discussion threads. Though it is not traceable what kind of content triggered the moderators to delete a comment, it is relatively safe to assume that the comments were offensive in one way or the other and probably included a number of personal attacks. This becomes evident from comments that include quotes of already deleted comments. Here the quotes were useful to contextualise other participants' personal attacks. Though this category was not available for further analysis, I wanted to include them in my overall categorization scheme for completeness sake and to obtain an idea about the average number of deleted comments on *Guardian Online*.

#### 4.6.13. Results and discussion of personal attacks

In this section I am going to discuss the quantitative results for the different types of personal attacks introduced in the previous section. I will first discuss overall results, then tendencies across newspapers as well as across article topics. In addition, I will look at the distribution of the different types across comments and the average number of types of personal attacks per comment. Finally, I will look at quantitative splits between attacks against newspaper representatives versus attacks against co-commentators across the news sites.

Overall, I registered 775 occurrences of 12 different types of personal attacks across 1,750 comments. Table 20 gives an overview of the 12 types:

**Table 20.** Types of personal attacks overall

Types of personal attacks	n=
Morals & ethics	122
Perception of situation	114
Cognition	107
Condescension & ridicule	105
Prudential judgment	65
Veracity	53
Ignore & snub	50
Discussion manners	50
Moderated	44
Inconsistency	35
Bias	19
Threats & warnings	11
<b>Total n=</b>	<b>775</b>

They are listed in descending order by frequency. Interestingly, the four most frequent types already account for 58% (448 occurrences) of all the personal attacks produced

in the data. Despite the use of personal attacks in reader responses, threats and warnings do not appear to be typical of this form of communication (1% of all occurrences). Given the more powerful position of newspaper representatives, it is also not surprising that all of the threats and warnings were uttered by commentators only towards their co-commentators. The low number of this type may also be explained by the fact that the power of the commentators to impose on another (pseudo)anonymous person's freedom of action in a virtual space is very limited, and thus to a certain extent threats and warnings will remain futile. As already mentioned in section 4.6.12, data for moderated comments was only available for *Guardian Online* and account for 44 occurrences in the sub-corpus of this newspaper (i.e. 350 comments). In other words, almost 13% of all comments were flagged as deleted from the original discussion threads on *Guardian Online*.

Personal attacks were not evenly spread across newspapers. Table 21 illustrates that almost 90% of all the personal attacks against journalists or co-commentators were issued on the two up-market newspapers *Telegraph Online* and *Guardian Online* and the mid-market newspaper *Express Online*. Surprisingly *Sun Online* and *Mail Online* attracted a rather small amount of personal attacks in relation to journalists or co-commentators.

**Table 21.** Personal attacks across newspapers

Newspaper	Personal attacks n=
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	262
<i>Express Online</i>	229
<i>Guardian Online</i>	188
<i>Sun Online</i>	79
<i>Mail Online</i>	17
<b>Total n=</b>	<b>775</b>

However, one should also not forget that the focus of this study is on personal attacks in relation to key communicators in the discussion threads (i.e. newspaper representatives and users who take part as active commentators). The figures above do not account for personal attacks towards key actors in articles since they are not considered active participants in the communicative situation in reader response discussions (see also section 4.3). In other words, these key actors are very unlikely to read or respond to personal attacks. Since the investigation of different types of personal attacks links to the previously discussed analysis on the sequential discourse dynamics in conflictive exchanges (see section 4.4) key actors were also excluded

from the investigation here. Nevertheless, my data reveals that personal attacks against key actors did occur on *Sun Online* and *Mail Online*. One could hypothesize that participants on these two sites are less confrontational since they refrain from attacking participants who could also counter attack them. They rather attack key actors that will not respond to their personal attacks.

The difference across the newspapers may be related to the topic of the articles and the fact that they were primarily not discussed in a controversial manner among participants. Also, the fact that articles on *Telegraph Online* and *Guardian Online* were opinion articles may partly be a reason why these were discussed in a more controversial manner and thus may have also triggered more personal attacks. *Express Online* articles were general news articles but always included an explicit invitation in the end of the article to debate its content. *Sun Online* and *Mail Online* discussion threads were related to general news articles and also attracted a lot of discussions but not so much conflictive impolite discourse among participants. I will return to these arguments in the following paragraphs.

Table 22 shows the uneven distribution of personal attacks across comments and newspapers:

**Table 22.** Distribution of personal attacks (PAs) across comments and newspapers

Newspaper	Total comments n=	Comments with PAs n=	% share of total comments	Total PAs in comments n=	Ø PAs per comment n=
<i>Guardian Online</i>	350	162	46%	188	1.2
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	350	149	43%	262	2
<i>Express Online</i>	350	103	29%	229	2.2
<i>Sun Online</i>	350	67	19%	79	1.2
<i>Mail Online</i>	350	17	5%	17	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,750</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>775</b>	<b>n.a.</b>

On average, that is at least 1 personal attack per identified comment on *Guardian Online* and 2 personal attacks per identified comment on *Telegraph Online*. On *Express Online*, around one third of the comments included personal attacks (29%, 103 comments) and thus at least 2 personal attacks per identified comment. On *Sun Online*, every fifth comment included a personal attack (67 out of 350, 19%). On average, that is also at least 1 personal attack per identified comment. *Mail Online* comes last with only 5% of the comments including personal attacks and 1 personal attack per identified comment. In sum, comments generally contain minimum 1 but usually not more than 2 attacks. Also, though the number of comments with negative

communicative behaviour remains below the 50% mark for all five newspapers, the individual newspapers vary greatly.

Importantly, personal attacks are also not evenly spread across discussion threads. While some articles attracted a high number of personal attacks in the comment section, some threads did not contain a single personal attack (see Table 23 on personal attacks per article topic).

**Table 23.** Personal attacks (PAs) per topic and newspaper

Article topic	News-paper*	PAs n=	Total PAs per topic n=	Comments n=	Total comments per topic n=	% of PAs per comment
<i>Economics</i>	<i>T.O.</i>	115	266	50	200	133%
	<i>E.O.</i>	88		50		
	<i>E.O.</i>	48		50		
	<i>T.O.</i>	15		50		
<i>Society &amp; Religion</i>	<i>E.O.</i>	30	166	50	450	37%
	<i>G.O.</i>	26		50		
	<i>T.O.</i>	25		50		
	<i>S.O.</i>	24		50		
	<i>G.O.</i>	23		50		
	<i>G.O.</i>	20		50		
	<i>E.O.</i>	15		50		
	<i>M.O.</i>	2		50		
	<i>M.O.</i>	1		50		
				50		
<i>Politics</i>	<i>G.O.</i>	30	156	50	500	31%
	<i>G.O.</i>	24		50		
	<i>E.O.</i>	23		50		
	<i>G.O.</i>	23		50		
	<i>E.O.</i>	20		50		
	<i>T.O.</i>	20		50		
	<i>T.O.</i>	14		50		
	<i>M.O.</i>	2		50		
	<i>M.O.</i>	0		50		
	<i>S.O.</i>	0		50		
<i>Environment</i>	<i>G.O.</i>	42	87	50	150	58%
	<i>T.O.</i>	40		50		
	<i>E.O.</i>	5		50		
<i>Celebrities</i>	<i>T.O.</i>	33	48	50	250	19%
	<i>M.O.</i>	8		50		
	<i>M.O.</i>	3		50		
	<i>S.O.</i>	3		50		
	<i>M.O.</i>	1		50		
<i>Sports</i>	<i>S.O.</i>	22	38	50	150	25%
	<i>S.O.</i>	16		50		
	<i>S.O.</i>	0		50		
<i>Odd</i>	<i>S.O.</i>	14	14	50	50	28%
<b>Total n=</b>		<b>775</b>	<b>775</b>	<b>1,750</b>	<b>1,750</b>	<b>44%</b>

\* Abbr.: *T.O.* = *Telegraph Online*; *G.O.* = *Guardian Online*; *M.O.* = *Mai Online*; *E.O.* = *Express Online*; *S.O.* = *Sun Online*.

At first sight, topic-wise there is also no clear tendency (see also Table 10 for a topic split per newspaper). As illustrated in Table 23, each topic category (except for the category “Odd”) contains a number of discussion threads with a high and low number of personal attacks respectively. For example, in the category “Economics” while there is 1 article from *Telegraph Online* that contained 115 personal attacks in its discussion thread of 50 comments, the same newspaper had another article on economics that just contains 15 personal attacks overall. Similar tendencies can also be noted for the other topic categories. For example, in the category “Politics”, while 6 out of 10 articles included 20 or more personal attacks per article discussion thread, there were also 2 political articles that did not contain any personal attacks. The topic of the article can but does not have to be a possible explanation for the occurrence of personal attacks among contributors.

Relatively speaking we see differences across the various topic categories. Considering the relative number of total personal attacks per total number of comments in each category we can see the following: The category “Economics” contains most personal attacks of all categories with an occurrence rate of 133%. In other words, each comment contains a minimum of more than 1 personal attack on average. This compares to, for example, the lowest category “Celebrities” where only 1 in 5 comments (19%) contain personal attacks. Put differently, personal attacks are 7 times more likely to occur in the category “Economics” than in the category “Celebrities”. The category “Economics” is followed by the categories “Environment”. Here, in a bit more than half of the comments personal attacks occur on average (i.e. 58%). In more than a third of comments on the topics of “Society & Religion” as well as “Politics” personal attacks occur (37% and 31% respectively). The categories with the relatively least number of personal attacks per number of comments are the categories “Odd”, “Sports” and “Celebrities” (28%, 25% and 19% respectively). Finally, it should be added that the different categories do not contain an even amount of article discussion threads (see Table 23).<sup>163</sup> This factor could influence the reliability of the findings despite normalisation.

Frequencies for the different types of personal attacks specifically aimed at co-commentators are illustrated in Table 24. A total of 460 personal attacks out of all

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<sup>163</sup> This uneven distribution is related to the methodological setup of this study. Across the newspapers, discussion threads with the highest number of contributions were selected for the corpus. This meant, that the topic of the article was not a selection criterion for the data set.

personal attacks identified in the data were aimed at co-commentators across the five news sites. With a personal attack, a commentator may have addressed a single commentator or multiple commentators at the same time. Table 24 excludes the category “moderated personal attacks” since it was not possible to identify the addressee in these moderated comments.

Overall, the first 4 strategies (condescension & ridicule, perception of the situation, morals & ethics and cognition) account for almost 70% of all the personal attacks against co-commentators. The other 7 strategies together account for the other 30%.

**Table 24.** Personal attacks against co-commentators

Types of personal attacks	n=	% share (rounded)
Condescension & ridicule	94	20%
Perception of situation	74	16%
Morals & ethics	73	16%
Cognition	71	15%
Discussion manners	48	10%
Veracity	25	5%
Ignore & snub	23	5%
Inconsistency	19	4%
Prudential judgment	12	3%
Threats & warnings	11	2%
Bias	10	2%
<b>Total n=</b>	<b>460</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 25 illustrates a different picture for attacks against journalists. It needs to be added here that in a few cases these attacks did not always directly aim at the journalist but also at the newspaper as an entity. Overall, 271 personal attacks were registered. Also here the category “moderated personal attacks” is ignored.

The first 3 strategies already account for 53% of all the occurrences (i.e. “prudential judgment”, “morals & ethics” and “perception of the situation”). Attacks regarding the mental capabilities and truthfulness of the journalist as well as attacks of the type “ignore & snub” account for more than one third of the occurrences (i.e. 33%). The 5 least frequent strategies add up to 14% (i.e. “inconsistency”, “condescension & ridicule”, “bias”, “discussion manners”) whereby no personal attack of the type “threats & warnings” was aimed at a journalist.



**Table 25.** Personal attacks against journalists and/or the newspaper

Types of personal attacks	n=	% share (rounded)
Prudential judgment	53	20%
Morals & ethics	49	18%
Perception of situation	40	15%
Cognition	36	13%
Veracity	28	10%
Ignore & snub	27	10%
Inconsistency	16	6%
Condescension & ridicule	11	4%
Bias	9	3%
Discussion manners	2	1%
Threats & warnings	0	0%
<b>Total n=</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>100%</b>

The 5 most frequent strategies also reflect indirectly a negative evaluation of the journalist's professional skills (cf. also Neurauter-Kessels 2011). All 5 strategies relate either to ethical journalistic values (cf. also *The Guardian's* Editorial Code 2007) that are important for the daily work of any journalist or characteristics that a reporter should have to act as a credible and trustworthy journalist. Prudential judgement and a proper perception of situations as well as cognitive skills are important for good reporting. At the same time, journalists should be truthful as well as morally and ethically reliable. Interestingly, however, objectivity, another value in any journalist's work does not appear to be an issue for most commentators. Nevertheless, according to Neurauter-Kessels (2011:209), journalists are likely to consider personal attacks in relation to these values as face threatening since they "[question] them in their core capacity as journalists."

Interestingly, while "prudential judgement" attacks were most frequent in the journalist data (20%), it was one of the least frequent strategies in the commentator data with 3%. However, attacks regarding the moral and ethical character of a person as well as attacks regarding the perception of a situation were the second and third most frequent strategies in both data sets (33% for attacks against journalists and 32% for attacks against commentators). Likewise, attacks regarding the mental capabilities of a person accounted for around the same percentage share in both data sets with 15% and 13% respectively. Attacks regarding the truthfulness and attacks of the type "ignore & snub" occurred twice as often in the journalist data with 10% (versus 5% in the commentator data). Attacks of the type "inconsistency", "bias" and "threats &

warnings” were among the least frequent strategies in both data sets with the last category only occurring in the commentator data set.

Finally, while attacks of the type “Condescension & ridicule” were the most frequent strategy used in the commentator data set with 20%, the strategy account for only 4% of all strategies in the journalist data set. Attacks regarding the discussion behaviour of a person were only of prominence in the commentator data set with 10% (versus 1% in the journalist data set). Since journalists were not featuring as active participants in the discussion threads, this may partly explain the difference here regarding this type of strategy.

Finally, the difference in the number of attacks between journalists and commentators in my data set may be partly explained by the type of article that journalists produced as well as the amount of information that is known about the respective reporter. Table 26 illustrates that out of the total number of attacks (731, excluding moderated personal attacks), 98% of all attacks on journalists and/or the newspaper occurred on *Telegraph Online* and *Guardian Online*. *Express Online* did not contain a single attack on a journalist. *Sun Online* and *Mail Online* account for the remaining 2% of attacks on journalists.

**Table 26.** Distribution of personal attacks (PAs) on commentators vs. journalists and/or the newspaper across newspapers

Newspaper	Total PAs n=	PAs on commentator(s)	PAs on journalist/ newspaper
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	262	71	191
<i>Express Online</i>	229	229	0
<i>Guardian Online</i>	144	69	75
<i>Sun Online</i>	79	78	1
<i>Mail Online</i>	17	13	4
<b>Total n=</b>	<b>731</b>	<b>460</b>	<b>271</b>

Considering the different types of articles (see also section 4.1), *Telegraph Online* and *Guardian Online* were the only two newspapers in the data set in which all investigated discussion threads were based on opinion pieces (except for 1 article on *Guardian Online*). Also, these were the two newspapers that provided the most detailed profiles of their journalists compared to the other newspapers. While not all journalists had the official title “columnist”, it can be argued in line with Conboy (2007:87) that the role of all the journalists of the opinion pieces were “not just in this opinion brokering but also in engendering controversy and eliciting correspondence from readers to generate further opinion and debate within the paper as part of its

communicative cycle.”<sup>164</sup> Given their specific role, this increases the potential of conflictive encounters between the journalist and the contributors to the discussion threads. Therefore, it is also not surprising that almost all of the personal attacks took place on *Guardian Online* and *Telegraph Online*. On the other hand, given the different nature (i.e. general news reports) of the articles for the other three newspapers and the fact that except for their name nothing is revealed about these authors, it is not surprising that personal attacks against journalists were rare there. Finally, on *Telegraph Online* and *Guardian Online*, personal attacks targeted at journalists account for the majority of attacks with 73% and 52% respectively. Apparently, the prominence of the journalists in these articles increases the likelihood of an attack against the journalist rather than an attack at a co-commentator.

#### 4.6.14. *Express Online: A special case*

While I discussed the different types of personal attacks across news sites, topics and according to addressees of these attacks in the previous section, now I want to pay special attention to *Express Online* since this news site stands out in two ways. On the one hand, discussion threads include the second highest number of personal attacks overall (229 personal attacks). On the other hand, however, these attacks were produced by a much smaller group of active commentators than on the other news sites.

As already discussed in section 4.5.1, Table 18 illustrated that *Express Online*’s user group of active contributors in discussion threads is much smaller compared to the other four news sites and shows a more interactive engagement with co-commentators. While it took 491 unique commentators to produce 600 comments on *Mail Online*, it only took 67 unique users on *Express Online* to produce the same number of comments during the collection period. It was argued that *Express Online* shows a more interactive structure in conflictive encounters and that this may be linked to the small group of users. This circumstance suggests a more close-knit community where chances are high that participants may meet each other more frequently across various discussion threads. I also suggested that as a result users might get to know each other more easily and thus start to engage in more interactive discussions. On the other hand, this may also increase the chances of conflictive

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<sup>164</sup> There is one special case on *Telegraph Online* where the producer of the article was not a professional journalist but former Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

encounters between participants who are not on good terms with each other. Since *Express Online* includes the second highest number of personal attacks (i.e. 229 personal attacks) across the five news sites, it is worth digging deeper into the data. Looking at the 350 comments that were analysed for personal attacks for each newspaper it is striking that it only took 14 unique users to produce the 229 personal attacks. If we compare that to the other two newspapers, which also had a high number of personal attacks in their discussion threads, a completely different picture emerges: On *Guardian Online*, it took 124 unique users to produce 188 personal attacks. On *Telegraph Online* it took 135 unique users to produce 262 personal attacks.

As Table 27 illustrates the personal attacks which the 14 unique users produced are spread across 103 comments. In other words, 29% of the total data set of 350 comments included personal attacks. While they were responsible for all offences in the data set, these 14 were also overall the most productive commentators. In total, these users published 327 of the 350 investigated comments. The remaining 23 comments were produced by 15 unique users.

**Table 27.** *Express Online*: Distribution of personal attacks (PAs) across users and comments

User name	Comments with PAs n=	Total comments per user n=
Welsh_Dragon	25	43
imonlysaying	17	81
cassandra	16	50
glen1	10	13
Harri_if_hipphopper_wants_a_date_just_ask	7	53
CRESSY	6	15
pongo	6	6
Hookit58	4	12
Wolf	4	6
Codeblue	2	18
hip_hopper	2	3
marigold	2	21
Disgruntled	1	4
alanah	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>n.a.</b>

Interestingly, the 3 users “Welsh\_Dragon”, “imonlysaying” and “cassandra” already account for more than 50% of all the comments with personal attacks. These 3 commentators are also among the users who contributed the most comments overall to the investigated discussion threads. In sum, 174 out of the 350 were posted by these

three participants alone. Such a high concentration on such a small group of users suggests that personal attacks appear to be part of their usual communicative behaviour on the site. That appears to be most obviously the case for “Welsh\_Dragon”. In total, 25 out of the 43 comments he/she produced were offensive (i.e. 58% of all the user’s comments). There are of course also other users, such as “pongo”, where the same could be said: 6 out of the 6 comments by Pongo included personal attacks. Nevertheless “Welsh\_Dragon” stands out because of his/her highly active participation across the site.

However, looking at the number of comments with personal attacks is only the first step. More importantly is the number of personal attacks against co-commentators<sup>165</sup> that the individual users produced in these comments. Table 28 reveals that a group of 5 users together already account for almost 80% (182 attacks) of all the personal attacks that were produced on the site. The other 9 users together account for the remaining 20% of all personal attacks (47 attacks). The users “imonlysaying” and “cassandra” are also among these top 5 attackers but “Welsh\_Dragon” by far stands out as the top offender.

**Table 28.** *Express Online*: Personal attacks per unique user

Personal attacks per unique user on <i>Express Online</i>	n=	% share (rounded)
Welsh_Dragon	86	38%
glen1	29	13%
cassandra	23	10%
Wolf	23	10%
imonlysaying	21	9%
Harri_if_hipphopper_wants_a_date_just_ask	13	6%
CRESSY	10	4%
Codeblue	6	3%
pongo	6	3%
Hookit58	5	2%
Disgruntled	2	1%
hip_hopper	2	1%
marigold	2	1%
alanah	1	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>100%</b>

This user alone was responsible for producing 38% of all the personal attacks (86 attacks) in the data set. In other words, he/she produced more personal attacks than were registered on *Sun Online* or *Mail Online* altogether. According to a detailed user

<sup>165</sup> As already discussed, on *Express Online* all identified attacks were aimed at co-commentators. Attacks against journalists did not occurred.

profile check on *Express Online*, it becomes apparent that “Welsh\_Dragon” was not only a very active poster in the analysed discussion threads but is overall a very active poster on the site with more than 2,000 comments associated with this name (status October 31, 2010). This stands in stark contrast to other users such as “Harri\_if\_hipphopper\_wants\_a\_date\_just\_ask”, “Disgruntled”, “hip\_hopper”, “marigold”, who are even more active users than “Welsh\_Dragon” with a registered production of between 3,000 and 5,600 contributions per user but who do not demonstrate negative behaviour to the same extent. This is also especially true for “Harri\_if\_hipphopper\_wants\_a\_date\_just\_ask”, who produced 10 comments more than “Welsh\_Dragon” in the data set of 350 comments (53 comments, see Table 27) but who only produced 13 personal attacks across the investigated discussion threads. Interestingly, while “Welsh\_Dragon” is by far showing the most negative behaviour of all and is quick to attack other users (see also examples (33), (63), (66), (74) and (76)), he/she claims innocence.<sup>166</sup> In fact, the user is repeatedly complaining that he/she is actually the chosen victim of specific users on the site including “Hookit58” and “kingdom”<sup>167</sup> as example (77) illustrates:

(77) Hookit58 and kingdom are one and the same. Argue with either and they run crying to the moderators demanding your account be suspended. No doubt this account too will be suspended the moment either of these pathetic creeps realises it is here. The libellous comments and obsessive behaviour of these two underhand, and lying individuals have made membership of this forum highly unpleasant. However, what they failed to realise because they are too arrogant and stupid to do so is that their actions constituted a criminal offence. As such the Express are legally bound to hand over their details to the investigating officers. I look forward to meeting them in court.

(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009, “Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0002”)

“Welsh\_Dragon” accuses the two other users of libellous behaviour and argues that their behaviour has made *membership of this forum highly unpleasant*. However, this comment shows that what he/she wants others to believe stands in stark contrast to his/her own behaviour. In fact, he/she illustrates it by the use of personal attacks in this very comment. Also, while “Hookit58” is indeed among the users who also

<sup>166</sup> Interestingly, he/she also uses capital letters extensively in his/her postings. At times, the entire comment is written in capital letters.

<sup>167</sup> Other users that he/she specifically dislikes are “hip\_hopper”, “wannabeanmp” but by far these are not the only users he/she engages in conflict with.

produced personal attacks, he/she did so to a minimal extent compared to “Welsh\_Dragon”. Altogether “Hookit58” produced only 5 personal attacks. “kingdom’s” role is hard to judge since he/she only contributed 1 comment in the total data set, and this contribution did not contain any personal attacks. Next, example (77) also illustrates “Welsh\_Dragon’s” arguably exaggerated behaviour when he/she claims that their behaviour is so crossly offensive that it represents a *criminal offence* and that he/she is already preparing for a meeting in court.

The above comment is also revealing in regard to “Welsh\_Dragon’s” user account on the site. He/she claims that previous accounts have been shut down due to other users’ false accusations to the moderators. In fact, however, “Welsh\_Dragon’s” offensive behaviour may have caused moderators to shut down his/her account with or without recommendation of the other users.

Actually, in my data set alone “Welsh\_Dragon” operates already with three different user names (“welsh\_dragon”; “welsh\_\_dragon” and “welsch\_dragon”).<sup>168</sup> This confirms that *Express Online* indeed shut down his/her account repeatedly and further suggests that “Welsh\_Dragon” may have been on the site to cause trouble on purpose. A check at the end of October 2010 revealed that the user was again operating under a new user name called “Welsh\_Dragon\_2010”. Thanks to *Express Online*’s archive of the number of comments per user and when users last posted, all aliases could be identified as one belonging to one and the same user. Also, the short exchange between “glen1” and “CRESSY” (example (78)) confirms the assumption that “Welsh\_Dragon” has been operating under multiple accounts and that he/she is always up to confrontational encounters.

(78) WHY BOTHER CRESSY?

Is there any point getting sucked in Cressy, no matter if you are diplomatic or defending yourself (which you needn't do). The reaction from dragon is predictable and being carried on from his previous incarnation on here. [...]

(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009, “Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0031”)

“glen1” suggests that it is not worth getting into a discussion with this user because he/she will always show the same type of behaviour (i.e. negative, offensive, confrontational). While “glen1” suggests to ignore the user, others started to make fun

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<sup>168</sup> For consistency’s sake I use the pseudonym “Welsh\_Dragon” whenever I refer to this user.

out of him/her and no longer take him seriously as example (79), a comment by user “imonlysaying”, illustrates:

(79) DID YOU SAY THAT DRAGON OR WRITE IT??? MY GOD YOU HAVE  
INSULTED,UMBRAGED AND INDEED MORTIFIED THIS VERY DAY. YOUR NOT ON THE  
TELLY ARE YOU?

*(Express Online, September 07, 2009, “Is\_there\_too\_much\_swearing\_0008”)*

Example (80), a comment by the user “cassandra”, also highlights both “Welsh\_Dragon’s” predictable behaviour and “cassandra’s” refusal to take “Welsh\_Dragon” any longer seriously:

(80) [...] I can’t speak for W/Draggy I’m sure he will let us all know in  
uncertain terms though  
C’mon Taff,.....Let rip!....I’ve battened down the hatches,.....don’t  
disappoint me now, you know I expect great things from you, don’t let me  
down! [...]

*(Express Online, September 09, 2009, “Are\_British\_Courts\_0030”)*

In summary, all of the above hints reinforce the hypothesis that “Welsh\_Dragon” may indeed engage in offensive conflicts with others for his/her personal entertainment. In other words, his/her behaviour shares similarities with the concept of a flamer discussed in section 3.10.1. Users who no longer take him/her seriously may do so because they have also recognized the user’s hidden agenda. From a methodological point of view it should be added, that the identification of user behaviour as potentially flaming remains difficult if the person himself/herself does not explicitly admit it. Therefore, it is crucial to collect sufficient evidence beyond the linguistic data of a person (i.e. history of user profiles, interaction patterns and meta-discourse of other users) to reconstruct a person’s true intentions as flamer. If such evidence is not available, the identification of impolite behaviour as flaming behaviour in a CMC context is not feasible.

#### **4.7. Swearing in personal attacks**

In this section I am going to introduce the concept of swearing, discuss its functions, different types and its role in impoliteness discourse. Specifically, the use of swearing in combination with personal attacks in reader responses will be illustrated and evaluated. To close this section I will comment on my method to identify swearing in personal attacks.



Swearing, also discussed under the heading of cursing (Montagu [1967] 1968), expletives (Stenström 1991), dirty words (Jay 1992) or bad language (McEnery 2006), is generally understood as words or phrases that relate to three taboo topics as Stapleton (2010:290) listed:

- Excretory/scatological – those which relate to bodily functions and associated body parts (e.g., *shit, piss, arse*);
- Sexual – those which relate to sexual acts or to genitalia (*fuck, prick, cunt, wank*);
- Profanity – those which refer to religious issues (*damn, goddamn, bloody, Christ sake*).

Stapleton (2010:301, footnote 1) adds that recently profane swearing is often no longer considered taboo due to its frequent use in everyday life. However, as will become clear in the following paragraphs, the taboo character is in any event always heavily depended on the contextual usage. Regardless of the taboo area, euphemistic swearing may be added as a fourth category. Here swear words or phrases are in disguise due to phonetic modifications (cf. Biber et al. [1999] 2004:1094; Montagu [1967] 1968:105). Ljung (2011:11) describes them as “milder words and phrases used to replace swearing” such as *darn* instead of *damn* or *shoot* instead *shit*. They are interesting in themselves since they reveal a speaker’s awareness of existing norms and their conscious management of these norms. In any case, swearing is always understood in a non-literal way and many forms could also be described as “formulaic language” as Ljung points out (2011:4).

Swearing has multiple functions. Characteristically, swearing is used to convey a negative emotional state of a person (e.g. anger, frustration) (Jay & Janschewitz 2008:267; Stenström 1991:240). However, the same words or phrases may also be used positively to express humour or act as a marker of social bonding and identity (cf. Stapleton 2010 for a detailed discussion of these functions). For example, friendly banter among teenagers or “licensed” swearing (cf. also section 3.10.1) would fall in the latter categories. In such cases, also positive emotions may be associated with this ludic form of swearing. The empirical investigation of swearing in relation to personal attacks in reader responses will however focus on the first function of swearing only. It is also hypothesized that swearing is only used to express a negative emotional state in personal attacks in reader responses.

Typologically, Jay & Janschewitz (2008:269–270) distinguish between intentional and unintentional forms of swearing. The former type, also referred to as

“propositional” swearing, is defined as “consciously planned and intentional” by the speaker. However, Jay & Janschewitz argue that this type does not necessarily have to have a negative effect either when used in an utterance like *This pie is pretty fucking good*. The “non-propositional” type, on the other hand, is an “unplanned” and “automatic emotional response” triggered, for example, in situations of surprise or in relation to a mental disorder (e.g. Tourette Syndrome<sup>169</sup>). Jay (2000:50) gives the example of a woman who accidentally hits her fingers with a hammer and cries out *Shit*. The second type may be less likely in reader responses but it is hypothesized that both forms may occur. Nevertheless, also for swearing, intention reconstruction remains a challenge just as with the reconstruction of speaker intention in impoliteness in general.

While there are a number of ways to distinguish between different types of swearing (cf. for example McEnery 2006 for a very detailed grammatical categorization), I would like to make a distinction between three core types of swearing: Firstly, there is “exclamatory swearing” (e.g. *Shit!*) (cf. also Montagu [1967] 1968:105). Here swearing is neither directly associated with a person or an object and is often used “in the heat of the moment” (Jay 2000:48). Jay (2000:48–49) argues that this type of “reflexive” swearing is often used to reflect a person’s emotional state and is comparable to Goffman’s concept of “response cries” in self-talk. The example with the hammer fits neatly in this category. Ljung (2011:22) also includes expressions such as *for God’s sake*. These can occur as independent structure but can also be integrated into utterances such as *You’re having a sabbatical, for God’s sake!* (Ljung 2011:22). Secondly, swear words or phrases can be used for “verbal emphasis” (Stenström 1991:295). In such a case, swear words act as intensifiers of an utterances (e.g. *This is a bloody stupid idea*).<sup>170</sup> Here the attitudinal stance of the speaker becomes especially apparent (cf. also Bousfield 2008a:112). Finally, I would like to distinguish swear words which may be used as a substitute for more neutral terms. For example, *I really can’t be arsed at the moment!*<sup>171</sup> Arguably,

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<sup>169</sup> See Jay (2000, chapter 26) for a discussion of this medical condition.

<sup>170</sup> For an even more detailed categorization of different types of swear words and phrases beyond the needs of this study see McEnery (2006:32).

<sup>171</sup> *Express Online*, September 09, 2009, “Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0034”.

these also work as a type of verbal emphasis to underline a speaker's stance in a message.

As with language phenomena in general, also swearing is heavily context-sensitive. The same swear words or phrases may thus be interpreted differently depending on the situational context and the participants involved. Jay & Janschewitz (2008:272) argue that factors such as the relation between interactants, as well as the place of interaction (private vs. public locations) and the formality of a communicative situation influence interpretations of swearing and thus also evaluations of appropriateness of swearing in a given situation (cf. also Stapleton 2010; Stenström 1991). While I will treat each of the mentioned factors separately in the coming paragraphs, naturally all of these factors may come into play simultaneously in a given communicative situation.

Jay & Janschewitz (2008:273) suggest that the relationship of the interactants will affect the interpretation of swearing. They argue that being swore at by your best friend is much more hurtful than by a person that you do not like at all. In reader responses then swearing by co-commentators may be experienced as less offensive or inappropriate since in many cases they are strangers to each other.

Further, status differences of the participants in terms of profession or education may influence participants' expectations in regard to the swearing. Jay (1992) concludes that it is less appropriate and expected for people in a higher occupational position to swear (cf. also Jay & Janschewitz 2008:273). Thus, I hypothesize that commentators on the news site would find it less appropriate and less likely for journalists to swear than for their co-commentators. This may have less to do with the difference in occupational status but with the fact that a journalist acts as a representative of a newspaper. Swearing may be considered inappropriate for such a public figure.

Next, the formality of a situation may affect swearing behaviour. Jay & Janschewitz (2008:275) claim that swearing is less likely in formal situations compared to, for example, an informal conversation in a bar. Of course, here the level of acquaintance among interactants plays a role as well. Nevertheless, people may find it less inappropriate and more likely for people to swear in less formal reader responses than they would expect in more formal letters to the editors. Here also censorship plays a role. I will return to this point in the following paragraph.

Connected to the formality of a situation is the place of conversation. People in publicly accessible locations may produce different swearing behaviour than in private locations. For example, as with impoliteness in general, the fact that journalists and commentators are sworn at in public may heighten the experienced level of offence. Also, especially the use of swearing in public is more heavily and systematically restricted by publicly accepted social norms (etiquette) and laws (Jay 2000:250ff). Having said that, social norms obviously also apply to conversations in a private context. These norms may consciously or subconsciously influence people's use of swearing in a particular situation. "We learn to inhibit swearing in situations where there is a personal cost, such as being punished or losing face. Any number of social sanctions can influence our use of swear words" (Jay & Janschewitz 2008:275). National laws regulate and censor speech in public (e.g. prohibition of hate speech, language on TV). Given the reader responses' public character, they are also subject to these laws. Additionally, as already discussed in section 3.8.3 netiquette and moderation rules influence the communicative behaviour of participants and thus may also affect the levels of swearing in reader responses.

For example, *Mail Online's* house rules,<sup>172</sup> explicitly asks their participants to refrain from "swear words or crude or sexual language". While the other news sites in this study do not explicitly mention swear words in their house rules, it is clear that language that may be offensive to others (e.g. "obscene, profane or sexually oriented" comments as *Express Online*<sup>173</sup> puts it) should be avoided (see section 3.8.3 for a detailed discussion). Punishments in the form of moderation may thus limit the use of swearing in reader responses. Furthermore, because swear words are more easily spotted in contributions, they may be more quickly located by newspaper moderators than other forms of inappropriate language use. Therefore, users may not be tempted to apply them so frequently. Also, possibly due to a newspaper's software filters (i.e. swear filters), comments with extensive swearing may be deleted automatically. Thus researchers may not even get hold of a large number of comments with swear words in the first place.

I would like to add another contextual dimension that may influence swearing behaviour of participants, namely, the mode of conversation: While swearing is often

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<sup>172</sup> Cf. [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/house\\_rules.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/house_rules.html) (accessed Nov. 11, 2009).

<sup>173</sup> Cf. <http://www.express.co.uk/myexpress/termsandconditions> (accessed Nov. 11, 2009).

associated with spoken interaction (e.g. McEnery 2006; Stenström 1991), swearing can also occur in written language. This may affect the realisation of spontaneous swearing since writing is arguably a more consciously planned process than speaking. These dynamics become especially interesting in the study of reader responses, which are, just like other forms of modern communication (e.g. chat, SMS), a hybrid form that is graphically written but shows oral features common to spoken interaction (cf. also Landert & Jucker 2011). Since medial graphic language products are less ephemeral than spoken language (despite the more fluid nature of online communication), interactants may think more carefully about their use of swearing. Swearing is possibly also less spontaneous and thus more consciously used. Finally, the fact that participants are not interacting face-to-face in reader responses could influence swearing behaviour.

Next to situational factors, social variables have been extensively investigated in connection with swearing. Factors such as age, gender, social class as well as regional backgrounds correlate with swearing (cf. Hughes 1991; Jay 2000; Jay & Janschewitz 2008; McEnery 2006; Stapleton 2010; Stenström 1991). While first attempts have been made to also investigate these variables in the online space, including Thelwall's (2008) study of swearing on MySpace (cf. also Stapleton 2010), frequently, social variables are not identifiable and, more importantly, not verifiable in many forms of online communication. Reader response communication is no exception here. Given this lack of information, a study of social variables in connection with reader responses is not attempted in this study.

Though swearing is often considered a research field of its own, already early impoliteness researchers, such as Culpeper (1996), talk about the use of swearing in relation to impoliteness. Swearing then is seen as means to attack the face of another person (cf. also Bousfield 2008a). In his most recent work, Culpeper (2011:136; 139) also underlines that taboo words are often used in combination with impoliteness formulae (cf. also section 3.9). There they act as intensifiers to "[help] secure an impoliteness uptake." Thinking along Locher & Watts' (2008: 95) concept of "affective linguistic reactions" in the "absence of explicitly expressed evaluations" of impoliteness, swearing may also help to gain insight into a speaker's negative evaluation of another participant's communicative behaviour.

However, independent of the fact whether a person who swears wants to intentionally attack another participant or he/she uses it unintentionally out of

frustration or anger, members of the reader response community may evaluate such language use differently. Jucker & Taavitsainen (2000:75) argue that swearing is not an insult per se,

but they may be perceived as insults if the addressee perceives them as disrespectful. This may be an intrusion into the addressee's personal territory to the extent that swearing in the presence of the addressee suggests that the speaker deems this to be appropriate in the presence of the addressee.

Despite existing netiquette norms, participants may not agree on whether it is appropriate or inappropriate to swear in reader response contributions. As with impoliteness in general, also evaluations of swearing may differ depending on a person's personal, social and cultural norms. Arguably, in situations of heated debates, swearing to vent one's emotions may be considered more likely and maybe considered appropriate by the majority of contributors. Thus, per definition swearing cannot be considered impolite but needs to be evaluated within its contextual parameters. However, when used in combination with personal attacks it is hypothesized that the likelihood of a negative evaluation of such communicative behaviour may increase for the victim of such attacks. Nevertheless, the degree of offence taken by a member of the reader response community is not measurable. Consequently, any attempt to rank swear words in terms of their offensiveness as is sometimes attempted in research or by media institutions such as the BBC or the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the US (cf. Ljung 2011:9) have to be viewed critically.

In conclusion, it should be stressed again that the analysis of specific linguistic features in this study should not create the idea that they are understood as inherently impolite. However, they may serve as elements to reinforce evaluation of impoliteness in combination with personal attacks in reader responses.

In terms of method, I have identified instances of swearing according to Stapleton's (2010) scheme in my data. Additionally, I also included euphemistic uses of swearing. Swearing was only coded in combination with one of the 775 personal attacks which had previously been identified in reader response comments across the five news sites. Though name-calling such as *old fucks* or *boribgfart*<sup>174</sup> is also often discussed under the heading of swearing, this type of linguistic behaviour was not

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<sup>174</sup> Cf. *Telegraph Online*, Sep. 09, 2009, "Does\_white\_America\_hate\_Barack\_0043"; *Express Online*, Sep. 18, 2009, "Should\_public\_services\_0033".

accounted for in this part of the analysis. I will discuss results for this aspect separately in sections 4.8 to 4.8.2.

#### 4.7.1. Results and discussion of swearing

Given the moderated environment it is not surprising that there were only a total of 70 instances of swearing used in combination with personal attacks in the data set (see Table 29). *Express Online* contained most swearing with 26 instances. *Telegraph Online*, *Guardian Online* and *Sun Online* followed with 16, 14 and 12 instances. *Mail Online* contained the least amount of swearing with only 2 occurrences.

**Table 29.** Swearing per newspaper

Newspaper	Swearing n=
<i>Express Online</i>	26
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	16
<i>Guardian Online</i>	14
<i>Sun Online</i>	12
<i>Mail Online</i>	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>

In total, 28 of these 70 swearing instances were related to the excretory/scatological taboo area including *bloody*, *a\$\$* (=“ass”) and *bullshit* and 20 instances were sexual in nature including *FFS* (=“for fuck’s sake”) and *b\*ll\*cking f\*ck* (=“ball licking fuck”). There were 2 instances that were excretory/scatological and sexual at the same time (i.e. *LMFAO*; =“laughing my fucking ass off”). Swearing related to profanity occurred 20 times including *Christ*, *for God’s sake*, *the hell* and *damn*.

In terms of distribution of swearing across comments with personal attacks, *Sun Online* leads with 16%. In other words, out of the 67 comments with personal attacks that were identified on this news site, 11 comments with personal attacks contained also swearing (see Table 30).

**Table 30.** Distribution of swearing across comments with personal attacks (PAs)

Newspaper	Comments with PAs n=	Comments with PAs & swearing	% ratio
<i>Express Online</i>	162	12	7%
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	149	13	9%
<i>Guardian Online</i>	103	11	12%
<i>Sun Online</i>	67	11	16%
<i>Mail Online</i>	17	2	12%
<b>Total</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>10%</b>

*Guardian Online* and *Mail Online* have a share of 12% of swearing in comments with personal attacks. The least amount of swearing in comments with personal attacks occurred on *Telegraph Online* and *Express Online* with 9% and 7% respectively. Overall, 49 (or 10%) out of 498 comments with personal attacks contained swearing.

The bulk of swearing was one-off means by users to vent their emotions in a personal attack. Only 5 users used swearing in more than 1 of their comments with personal attacks. On *Guardian Online* and *Sun Online*, 2 users used swearing in 2 of their comments. On *Express Online*, unsurprisingly, “Welsh\_Dragon” stands out with 7 comments that contained personal attacks with swearing. Out of the 25 comments with personal attacks he/she produced, 28% contained swearing. Two of his co-commentators (“Harri\_if\_hipphopper\_wants\_a\_date\_just\_ask” and “imonlysaying”) produced more than 1 comment (2 and 3 comments respectively) with personal attacks that also contained swearing. Interestingly, on *Telegraph Online*, were 135 unique users produced 262 personal attacks across the data set, no user who commented more than once used swearing on more than one occasion. Stenström (1991:240) argues that “the expletive repertoire is tied to personality, and for some individuals the use of expletives is just a reflection of routine behaviour”. Given however the present distribution we may tentatively conclude that, with the exception of “Welsh\_Dragon”, swearing cannot necessarily be related to the specific communicative behaviour of certain individuals in the data set, but swearing is used ad hoc by a range of different commentators in situations of emotional arousal.

Three types of swearing could be identified in the data. They were used to a similar extent in the different types of personal attacks (see Table 31). Of these 70 instances of swearing, 31 instances were euphemistic in nature. I will come back to this point later. First I am going to discuss each type in more depth.

**Table 31.** Types of swearing in personal attacks

Type of swearing	n=	Euphemistic n=
<i>Intensifying</i>	21	13
<i>Exclamatory</i>	22	11
<i>Substituting</i>	27	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>31</b>

First, swearing was used as a form of intensification in comments with personal attacks. Intensification was expressed by means of following adjectives, adverbs and



nouns: *bloody*, *b\*ll\*cking fuck* (= ball licking), *f\*\*\*ing* (=fucking) and *the hell*.<sup>175</sup> For example, following passage is part of a personal attack that targets the prudent judgment of the journalist:

(81) [...] Look, I know you don't want a Tory government (although why you still support the current bloody awful bunch I cannot imagine) but simply pushing Brown's Enron-style accounting does not and will never make your case. Government spending is going to have to be cut. End of bloody story.[...]

(*Guardian Online*, September 09, 2009, "In\_the\_great\_argument\_0019")

Here the user uses *bloody* twice as intensifier. In both cases, the attitudinal stance of the speaker becomes clear and may be used to vent the speaker's emotional arousal.

The second example is a special case, because this comment was written in response to an article that discussed whether there was presently too much swearing on TV. "Welsh\_Dragon" attacks previous commentators who complained about the level of swearing on TV. He/she on purpose uses the word *f\*\*\*ing* (=“fucking”) to ridicule his/her co-commentators.

(82) IS F\*\*\*ING SWEARING ON F\*\*\*ING TV F\*\*\*ING JUSTIFIED ? 30.08.09, 10:55am  
Is there too much f\*\*\*ing swearing on f\*\*\*ing TV today? Does it f\*\*\*ing affect our children, and does it reflect real f\*\*\*ing life.? Well the ba\*\*\*rds f\*\*\*ing swearing on f\*\*\*ing TV hasnt f\*\*\*ing affected me. And if you dont f\*\*\*ing like the swearing you can always use the f\*\*\*ing off switch.

(*Express Online*, September 07, 2009, "Is\_there\_too\_much\_swearing\_0002")

"Welsh\_Dragon's" swearing may well be understood as inappropriate by other users since they just mentioned their disapproval of swearing and realize that "Welsh\_Dragon" intentionally uses the intensifier *fucking* to upset them.<sup>176</sup>

The last example is taken from a discussion thread on *Telegraph Online* in response to an article that was written by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown. Here user "Rick" attacks Gordon Brown, fighting him with his own arguments that *failure should not be rewarded*. "Rick's" rhetorical question *what are you still doing in*

<sup>175</sup> I will return to the use of the asterisk in swearing when I discuss euphemistic swearing in detail.

<sup>176</sup> Example (82) could also be interpreted as a special use of irony. However, the reactions of "Welsh\_Dragon's" co-commentators show that they did not perceive his/her comment as ironic.

*Downing Street?* is intensified by means of *the hell* to possibly vent he/she his anger about Gordon Brown's inability or unwillingness to see her/his own failure as a Prime Minister.

(83) If failure should not be rewarded, what the hell are you still doing in Downing Street?

(*Telegraph Online*, September 18, 2009, "A\_new\_era\_of\_global\_economic\_0042")

*The hell* may serve as an intensifier to secure an "impoliteness uptake" by the addressee (cf. Culpeper 2011).

Exclamatory swearing is the second type of swearing used in personal attacks (22 out of 70 occurrences). Exclamatory swearing either occurred on its own but most frequently was integrated into longer utterances. Following phrases occurred: *My god*, *for god's sake*, *for christ's sake*, *Christ*, *for heaven's sake*, *good god*, *OMG* (= "oh my god"), *FFS*, *WTF* (= "what the fuck") and *LM(F)AO*.

In example (84) user "Auric" attacks the author (and indirectly the newspaper) for their lack of knowledge in the correct use of the English language. Clearly, "Auric" wants to vent his/her emotions and ends with an exclamatory *FFS*.

(84) <quote> Smokers are now New York's most discriminated minority </quote> Even by the Graun's standards, awful English and clearly not written by an educated foreigner, but a dim-witted native speaker. How would you use that verb? 'I am discriminated' etc. FFS

(*Guardian Online*, September 18, 2009, "Smokers\_0016")

It is questionable whether this form of exclamatory swearing could be compared to Goffman's "response cry" as found in self-talk. Rather, it appears that "Auric" more consciously uses the phrase in the end of his/her comment to emphasize a negative emotional attitude towards the author.

The same argument could be made about example (85). Commentator "Woodinator" wants to vent his/her frustration and anger at United Manchester soccer fans who he/she accuses of (among others things) unfairness towards a Liverpool fan. The Liverpool fan was found innocent after spending time in prison for allegedly murdering another person during a football game in Bulgaria. Similarly to example (84), "Woodinator" uses the expression *for gods sake* to reinforce his/her negative attitude towards his co-commentators.

(85) This article shows why liverpool fans HATE united fans. The lack of intelligence by the mancs is laughable, the guy is innocent, and someone else CONFESSED. yet we have comments on here like "he shouldnt be released" "the system is a joke" etc. Maybe if he was a man united fan you'd be saying different. Put club rivalries aside and see sense for gods sake.

(*Sun Online*, September 09, 2009, "Joy\_as\_kop\_fan\_0018")

The last example is taken from a discussion thread on *Sun Online* on an alien-like animal that was found along the shores of a Mexican lake. Here the commentator "wolvogirl" uses exclamatory swearing twice to emphasize his/her negative judgment of other people's contributions (i.e. *oh my good god, lmao*).

(86) oh my good god do people realise there is no such thing as a shell-less turtle the shell is part of the turtle which is developed from there ribs jeeeeeeeees r u really that stupid lmao its rele tickled me that has

(*Sun Online*, September 17, 2009, "Mystery\_beast\_0048")

Both exclamatory uses underline her/his disbelief in *how stupid* people are to believe that this animal must be a *shell-less turtle*. Especially her/his use of *lmao* appears to be used purposefully (i.e. intentionally) to ridicule since she/he reinforces it even by adding *its rle tickled me that has*.

In summary, given fact that users write these exclamatory forms of swearing consciously, it is questionable whether they can at all be compared to Goffman's "response cries" in self-talk. It appears that they work on a different level than, for example, in the previously mentioned situation where a person hitting her/his thumb cries out *Fuck!*. In reader responses it appears that all the identified exclamatory instances of swearing are more likely to be used intentionally to flag a person's negative attitude towards another commentator or journalist. As such exclamatory swearing may also serve as a tool to reinforce an "impoliteness uptake". While they may be spontaneous to a certain extent and reader responses are a hybrid form of communication that show oral features of expression, the fact remains that commentators consciously write them down. Based on this circumstance, this form of online exclamatory swearing needs to be differentiated from similar forms found in face-to-face conversation.

The third type of swearing I would like to describe as instances where swear words are used instead of a more neutral term to describe something. Thereby a

speaker's negative emotional attitude is expressed. Of course there are many other ways to express one's emotional state by means of negatively connotated expressions (cf. Langlotz & Locher 2010) in reader responses, but swearing can also be seen along similar lines.

Examples (87) through (91) illustrate this category.

(87) What a bunch of utter shit.

(*Guardian Online*, September 18, 2009, "Smokers\_0032")

(88) Your aim sucks dude.

(*Guardian Online*, September 19, 2009, "Why\_I\_threw\_0004")

(89) I really hope all this eduardo bashing comes back an bites u on the a\$\$.

(*Sun Online*, September 07, 2009, "Bilic\_keep\_it\_shut\_0039")

(90) By the way when are you having the general election we are all dreaming of so we can boot you and your scottish mafia up the arse and send you all back across the border where you belong

(*Telegraph Online*, September 18, 2009, "A\_new\_era\_of\_global\_economic\_0026")

(91) [...] And why would I give a dam about the Air Corps? I was a fighting man, not a glorified taxi driver for the junior service. [...]

(*Express Online*, September 09, 2009, "Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0038")

In example (87) "matteo80" responds to his/her previous commentators' contribution regarding their view on the smoking ban in New York. Instead of using a more neutral phrase like *I completely disagree with my co-commentators* he/she rather chooses to say *What a bunch of utter shit* to express his/her annoyance.

In example (88) "BHusseinObummer" attacks the author of the article, Muntazer al-Zaidi, who recounts why he threw a shoe at the former President of the United States George W. Bush. The likely intention of the user to ridicule the author by saying *Your aim sucks dude* could not have been captured in a more neutral expression like *Your aim is not good Mr. al-Zaidi*. I will come back to the "BHusseinObummer's" use of *dude* in the section name-calling, but in any case the verb *sucks* clearly underlines the speaker's negative attitude towards the addressee.

In example (89) the commentator "tranch" complains about his/her co-commentators attack on the key figure in the article, a British soccer player called

Bilic, hoping that their behaviour *comes back an bites u on the a\$\$*. The expression *bites u on the a\$\$* is an unambiguous means to communicate his/her annoyance to the other users. The same effect could not have been achieved with a less emotionally loaded expression like *I hope that one day you will receive the same negative treatment as you now give to Eduardo Bilic*.

Example (90) is similar to (89) and taken from the discussion thread in response to an article written by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown on his vision of global economics.

The last example (91) is a conflictive exchange between “Welsh\_Dragon” and “glen1” on the different divisions of military service in the UK and their participation in these divisions. “Welsh\_Dragon” expresses his anger by saying *Why would I give a dam about the Air Corps?* Also here the user chose (consciously or subconsciously) for an emotionally loaded utterance substituting it for a more neutral utterance such as *The Air Corps are not of any interest to me*.

Finally, I would like to discuss modified, i.e. euphemistic forms of swearing, that may occur in any of the introduced types as some of the previous examples already illustrated (e.g. (82), (84) and (89)). In sum, 31 occurrences of swearing included some form of euphemistic modification. Following two strategies occurred in the data:

1. asterisk and dollar signs to substitute a number of letters (e.g. *F\*\*\*ING, a\$\$, sh\*t, ars\*d mastu\*\*\*\*\**);
2. abbreviated forms (e.g. *FFS, OMG, WTF, B/S* (=“bullshit”));

The asterisk strategy was most frequent with 17 occurrences. Only in one case a user chose to use the dollar sign instead of an asterisk. It should be added, however, that 12 instances occurred in just one comment by “Welsh\_Dragon” (see example (82) above). Abbreviated forms were second with 14 occurrences. Arguably, abbreviated forms are a common strategy online for all types of expressions (e.g. *lol, rofl*); however using an abbreviated form for swear formulae may not just be a means to be more efficient in writing but also work as a disguise or less offensive means to vent one’s emotion. Both strategies may be used by commentators to appear less offensive. They may also hope that moderators and other users will accept the modified forms more easily. In any case, euphemistic forms of swearing demonstrate that users are well aware of the existing situational norms. Modifications show that users themselves assign a certain offensiveness to specific terms. Hypothetically, they may

not just be used to adhere to netiquette standards of the newspapers but also because a person does not want to attract negative evaluations from others.

In summary, swearing in reader responses is used as an effective means to vent negative emotions (anger, frustration, annoyance) during heated debates. It was argued that swearing might be used more consciously and thus less spontaneously in this form of communication since users have to transform their emotional outbursts into written language. This is especially the case with exclamatory forms of swearing. It is also concluded that swearing behaviour is obviously influenced by situational variables such as moderation and netiquette rules as well as the more informal character of this type of communication. The public setting is especially important since it not only regulates appropriate language use but may also influence the level of offence a person takes. From an impoliteness perspective they may in some circumstances be used to secure an “impoliteness uptake” (cf. Culpeper 2011) or reinforce the offensiveness of a personal attack. Also, commentators may simply not approve of other’s swearing behaviour even if they are not the addressees of a swearing sequence. In conclusion, just like with impoliteness in general, the interplay of different norms (personal and situational norms) will influence a participant’s judgement of other users swearing behaviour. Such a view thus assumes that swearing per definition cannot be understood as inherently impolite but judged within its context may be understood as impolite in specific situations. Finally, the fact that norms also influence and regulate one’s own swearing behaviour becomes evident in euphemistic swearing.

#### **4.8. Name-calling in personal attacks**

A special type of swearing is name-calling. Name-calling is here understood as types of nominal terms and phrases like *prat*, *coward* or *snotty nosed litte men*<sup>177</sup> to refer to individuals in a negative way. While *prat* and *coward* are negatively connotated, *men* can also be used as a neutral noun. However, *men* turns into a member of the name-

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<sup>177</sup> Cf. *Express Online*, September 07, 2009, “Is\_there\_too\_much\_swearing\_0005”; *Express Online*, September 19, 2009, “Should\_super\_heads\_0008”; *Express Online*, September 09, 2009, “Should\_we\_pay\_more\_0043”.

calling category through the addition of negatively connotated adjective *snotty nosed*.<sup>178</sup> Name-calling in reader responses may occur in

1) a direct address: *You unpatriotic swine!*<sup>179</sup>

OR

2) a descriptive reference to somebody directly or indirectly (i.e. 3<sup>rd</sup> person reference):

a. direct: *Racists scumbags you have proven to be.*<sup>180</sup>

b. indirect: *Heffer is an ignorant toad of a man.*<sup>181</sup>

As with swearing in general, name-calling is also heavily context-dependent. Situational factors which were discussed as relevant for swearing (see section 4.7) may also influence interpretations of name-calling in reader responses (e.g. acquaintances level of interactants, formality of situation, netiquette norms or the mode of conversation). Also, while name-calling may also be used in a ludic exchange just like other forms of swearing, in this study the focus is on name-calling that may be used inappropriately and possibly be understood as impolite by interactants. Ljung (2011:82) argues that these utterances may be used “antagonistically and involve a verbal attack on an addressee.” In line with Culpeper’s line of thinking, name-calling could be defined as a type of taboo behaviour that people may experience as “emotionally repugnant” (Culpeper 2011:256) and constitute a breach with a person’s equity rights (cf. also e.g. Spencer-Oatey 2008). At the same time these utterances may be experienced as a general threat to the face of a person since they always imply “low values for some target” (cf. Culpeper 2011:256) and thus a speaker’s negative attitude i.e. a dislike of a person (cf. also Ljung 2011:14; 124). Name-calling could also be seen as “affective linguistic” (Locher & Watts 2008:95) expressions that are used as negative evaluation of a person’s behaviour. In reader responses, name-calling may also be used to reinforce the negative impact of the personal attack. This effect is possibly created by the fact that it is in the nature of name-calling to make a negative “predication” about a person in

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<sup>178</sup> See also Ljung’s (2011:124) discussion of terms such as *architect* or *consultant* which may be used in a negative construction such as *Don’t be such an architect!*

<sup>179</sup> *Sun Online*, September 07, 2009, “Bilic\_keep\_it\_shut\_0015”.

<sup>180</sup> *Telegraph Online*, September 17, 2009, “Does\_white\_America\_hate\_Barack\_0043”.

<sup>181</sup> *Telegraph Online*, September 09, 2009, “The\_gulf\_between\_a\_Princess\_0048”.

regard to their identity (cf. also Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000:73). On the whole, name-calling may help us understand what is going on in a speaker's mind, and this linguistic behaviour could also be a sign that the speaker reacts to what he/she considers an offence by another person in the first place (cf. Locher & Watts 2008:95).

Name-calling, as defined previously, was searched for in all of the 775 personal attacks which had previously been categorized in the data. Name-calling was registered whenever the journalist or a co-commentator was referred to either via a direct address or when a descriptive reference was made to the former. Name-calling in connection with key actors in articles was not accounted for systematically in the corpus. Since key actors are not part of the immediate communicative situation in reader responses, it is more difficult to argue that they may feel offended by a commentator's use of name-calling in regard to their person. However, since this phenomenon is also frequent in reader responses a case study on this dimension will be presented in section 4.8.2.

#### 4.8.1. Results and discussion for name-calling

In total, 114 comments included at least one occurrence of name-calling in a personal attack (see Table 32). Thus out of the 498 comments with personal attacks which were identified in the total data set, 23% on average contained name-calling. However, the distribution among the individual newspapers varied. A total of 41% of *Express Online* comments with personal attacks also contained name-calling. *Telegraph Online*, *Sun Online* and *Mail Online* had a share ranging between 20% and 27%. *Guardian Online* contained the least number of comments with personal attacks which also contained name-calling with 12%.

**Table 32.** Distribution of name-calling across newspapers

Newspaper	Comments w. PAs & name-calling n=	Comments with PAs n=	% ratio
<i>Express Online</i>	42	103	41%
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	30	149	20%
<i>Guardian Online</i>	20	162	12%
<i>Sun Online</i>	18	67	27%
<i>Mail Online</i>	4	17	24%
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>23%</b>

Personal attacks on *Express Online* contained most instances of name-calling with 73 occurrences followed by *Telegraph Online* with 39 occurrences (see Table 33).



**Table 33.** Name-calling frequencies in personal attacks

Newspaper	Comments with PAs & name-calling	Name-calling			
		n=	Ø name-calling per comment n=	Direct address	Descriptive
<i>Express Online</i>	42	73	1.7	53	105
<i>Telegraph Online</i>	30	39	1.3		
<i>Guardian Online</i>	20	19	1.2		
<i>Sun Online</i>	18	23	1.1		
<i>Mail Online</i>	4	4	1.0		
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>n.a.</b>		

*Sun Online* and *Guardian Online* contained 23 and 19 instances of name-calling respectively. Last was *Mail Online* with 4 instances of name-calling. In other words, that is an average of almost 2 occurrences of name-calling per comment with personal attacks on *Express Online* and an average of 1 instance (rounded) of name-calling per comment with personal attacks on the other four news sites.

Taking a look per user, it becomes however apparent that specifically 2 users, namely, “cassandra” and “Welsh\_Dragon” produced most instances of name-calling. In total, 12 out of 25 of “Welsh\_Dragon’s” and 11 out of 16 of “cassandra’s” comments with personal attacks also contained name-calling. Three other users produced 4 comments with personal attacks that also contained name-calling (i.e. “Hookit58”, “imonlysaying”, and “Wolf”). On *Guardian Online* and *Telegraph Online*, only 2 users produced more than 1 comment with personal attacks and name-calling. On *Sun Online*, there were 3 and on *Mail Online* none of the users produced more than 1 comment with a personal attack that also contained name-calling.

Unsurprisingly, “Welsh\_Dragon” was also the commentator who produced most instances of name-calling overall. In total, name-calling occurred 28 times in 12 comments with personal attacks. “cassandra” followed with 21 instances of name-calling in 11 comments. The remaining 24 instances of name-calling were produced by 8 users. On *Telegraph Online*, the highest number of name-calling per user was 3 instances. Three users produced that amount. Six users produced 2 instances of name-calling, and 16 commentators used 1 instance of name-calling in a personal attack. On *Guardian Online*, 17 users produced 19 instances of name-calling in personal attacks. Thus only 2 commentators applied more than 1 instance of name-calling in their contributions. On *Sun Online*, 18 users produced 23 instances of name-calling in personal attacks. Only 3 users stood out with 4 and 2 instances of name-calling respectively. All others produced just 1 instance of name-calling each. On *Mail*

*Online*, 4 users produced 1 instance of name-calling each. In summary, while name-calling is more evenly distributed among a greater number of individual users on four out of the five news sites, “Welsh\_Dragon” and “cassandra” together were already responsible for 49 out of the 73 instances of name-calling on *Express Online*. It may be tentatively assumed that this type of linguistic behaviour is more typical of their communication style in a conflictive situation.

Descriptive name-calling references to journalists and other commentators occurred about 2 times more often than name-calling in a direct address (53 versus 105 instances respectively) (see Table 33). Of the descriptive references, 28 were second person address forms towards the addressee(s) and 77 were 3<sup>rd</sup> person references to an intended recipient or recipients.

Example (92) illustrates a direct address at a couple of previous commentators. User “Dione” personally attacks her/his previous commentators by calling them *jealous pudgy women*. She/he thereby discredits the character and looks of the other users. They may experience this attack as face threatening and thus impolite.

(92) Bring on the nasty commentaries , jealous pudgy women!!! You can only wish to have such beautiful ,wrinkle-free skin at her age and get such a handsome man to go out with you !Unfortunately that will never happen

(*Mail Online*, September 17, 2009, “Bloated\_Bride\_0049”)

In example (93) “1stbattaliongunners” addresses a previous commentator called “Migrationnotice” using the vocatives *THICKAS2SHORTMANCS* and *nappy-headed \*\*\*\** to address him/her. The offender thus first discredits the looks of the other commentator (by *Mancs* he/she is referring to Manchester United soccer fans) and then proceeds to attack the mental capacities of “Migrationnotice”. Interestingly, “1stbattaliongunners” decided not to spell out the second vocative completely. Just like with other forms of swearing he/she may realise that there are limits to the choice of expressing himself/herself in the reader response sections of *Sun Online*.

(93) THICKAS2SHORTMANCS...you can call me whatever u want, unpatriotic, traitor, i dont care....i really dont! I'd rather see Arsenal win the league or the champs lge than see England win the world cup. So put your patriotism in your pipe and smoke it, you nappy-headed \*\*\*\*! SIIMPLES!

(*Sun Online*, September 07, 2009, “Bilic\_keep\_it\_shut\_0019”)

As indicated, descriptive references accounted for the majority of name-calling incidences in personal attacks across the news sites. Example (94) is one of the 28 descriptive references that were second-person address forms at either the journalist or a co-commentator. User “alanah” attacks “Welsh\_Dragon’s” cognitive capabilities by calling him/her a *prat* due to his/her abundant use of swear words in a previous comment.

(94) [...] Welsh Dragon you are a prat, stick to your gutter humour comedy with inuendos leaving you to think for your self is funny comedy using swear words is not funny or clever [...]

(*Express Online*, September 07, 2009, “Is\_there\_too\_much\_swearing\_0005”)

The second example is taken from an exchange between three commentators (“Marcus Hunt”, “David Cram” and “John Law”). “John Law” responds to “Marcus Hunt” who had previously described “David Cram” as an *idiot*. Consequently “John Law” counter attacks “Marcus Hunt” in “David Cram’s” stead, also with the name-calling strategy. He/she describes the co-commentator as a *fascist shit*.

(95) <quote>  
 Marcus Hunt on September 19, 2009 at 06:21 AM To David Cram: You’re an idiot.  
 </quote>  
 I don’t think David claimed anything very much; merely referred to some data that people might like to refer to. You on the other hand sound like a fascist shit. [...]

(*Telegraph Online*, September 19, 2009, “Climate\_change\_campaigners\_0045”)

Commentators may also refer to their co-commentators or journalists by means of 3<sup>rd</sup> person name-calling. In other words, while it is clear who is the intended recipient, they do not interact with them directly. The relatively high frequency of this strategy (77 occurrences) is probably related to the specific communicative situation in reader responses as discussed in 4.3. In example (96) user “xxxxxxxxxxxxx” refers to previous commentators indirectly by describing them as *ignorant air heads* and *thick nasty idiots* following a discussion regarding an incident involving a soccer supporter of a rival team of Manchester United. In both cases the nouns are intensified by negatively connoted adjectives.

(96) one more comment - dont judge all united fans or mancs in general just because there are a few ignorant air heads that claim they are united fans. I am a united fan and i am still really happy for him. i hate

being tarred with the same brush as the thick nasty idiots who cant see past the manchester united badge!

(*Sun Online*, September 09, 2009, “Joy\_as\_kop\_fan\_0032”)

Example (97) was produced by user “william druce”, who discredits Mr. Heffer, the author of an article on Prince Charles and Diana, by an indirect use of the strategy name-calling. He/she first negatively describes the author as a *hypocrite* and then compares him/her with a *toad* that also lacks in intelligence. Likely, this kind of attack on the journalist’s identity is face threatening and may be experienced as impolite.

(97) Heffer is a hypocrite. He normally rants on about morality,yet here he condones Prince Charles’ adultery. At least Diana was English. Heffer is an ignorant toad of a man.

(*Telegraph Online*, September 20, 2009, “The\_gulf\_between\_a\_Princess\_0048”)

While I divided swearing into three topic categories (excretory/scatological, sexual, profanity), sources for name-calling are much more varied. Table 34 shows the 14 different topic areas which were the source for name-calling forms identified in my data:

**Table 34.** Topic areas related to name-calling in personal attacks

Topic areas of name-calling	n=	Data examples*
Character	55	<i>hypocrite, coward, lying scumbag</i>
Intellect	29	<i>prat, silly man, muppet</i>
Age	15	<i>granddaddy’s, little boy, babies</i>
Name slur	15	<i>W/Draggy for Welsh Dragon, General Gorgon for Gordon Brown, no-hoper for hiphopper</i>
Endearment	10	<i>sweetie, dear</i>
Nationality	9	<i>Taffy</i>
General	8	<i>sandwich short of a picnicense, chocolate fireguard, the tastiest morsel</i>
Relational	8	<i>dude, son, mate</i>
Religion/Politics	6	<i>NuLab haters, infant Talibani, religious crusader</i>
Looks	4	<i>snotty nosed litte men, pudgy women, THICKAS2SHORTMANCS</i>
Respect	3	<i>Good Lord Gordon, sir</i>
Scatological	3	<i>boribgfart, manure, shit</i>
Animal-based	2	<i>toad, swine</i>
Sexual/sexist	2	<i>bugger, bunch of girls, fucks</i>
<b>Total</b>	<b>169</b>	

\*misspellings are in the original

The total number of categories entries is higher than the total number of name-calling instances found in the data set (158 versus 169) since some of the name-calling forms were related to more than one topic category (e.g. *you unpatriotic swine*, which implies, on the hand, a character flaw and, on the other hand, is an animal-based type of name-calling). In the following I will discuss the majority of categories in more detail.

Some cases of name-calling are straightforward such as negative aspects regarding the character, intellect or age of person. Either a person discredits the personal character of a person or claims a lack of intelligence. For example, calling a grown up a *little boy* is face threatening since it belittles the addressee. Next are name slurs, in other words falsifications of a name with negative implicatures. Since the name is part of a person's identity, falsifications such as "W/Draggy" for "Welsh\_Dragon" also have a belittling effect on the user. The name slur *General Gorgon* for the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the author of one of the articles in the data set, hints at the Greek mythology where Gorgons were frightening female characters. Terms of endearment are interesting because usually they are used in a positive way. However, they may also create a negative implication when used in an ironic way. When a commentator personally attacks another user, while at the same time calling him/her *sweetie*, it creates the impression that the addressee is not taken seriously by his/her opponent (see example (98)).

(98) Ambrose sweetie get real.

(*Telegraph Online*, September 18, 2009, "The\_Euro\_0032")

Admittedly, the second form of this category is special. On the one hand, *dear* can be used as a noun on its own as in the following example:

(99) Karen D on September 19, 2009 at 06:47 PM Good gracious... I don't mind your being ignorant... but do try to display your ignorance with less vehemence dear..

(*Telegraph Online*, September 20, 2009, "The\_gulf\_between\_a\_Princess\_0025")

However, *dear* can also be used as an adjective in polite forms of address such as *Dear Ms. X*. As an exception, I have included this special address from also in my analysis since it can also be used ironically to address a journalist or commentator.

Similarly to the previous cases it has a belittling effect in such circumstances. Example (100) illustrates this point:

(100) Dear Toby-Old boy, No Human-being is that Colour, your writing it? All human-being- Colours are defined by Oxord-Dictionary!

(*Telegraph Online*, September 09, 2009, "Does\_white\_America\_hate\_Barack\_0045")

This effect is reinforced through the use of *old boy*. The only occurrence of name-calling related to the nationality of a person occurred in the *Express Online* data. While *Taff* or *Taffy* is a nickname for a Welsh person that is sometimes used negatively (Hughes 1991:491–492). All occurrences of *Taffy* were addressed at the user "Welsh\_Dragon". Name-calling instances that could not be assigned to any specific topic were categorized as "General". All of these ridicule the addressee in some way such as describing someone as a *sandwich short of a picnic* or *chocolate fireguard*. The next category plays with relational connections between interactants. Expressions like *dude*, *son* or *mate* can be used to express a close positive connection between interactants. However, referring to a person as *son* or *mate* when the speaker actually does not have a close connection with the addressee can create a negative implicature. In the cases of *son*, an asymmetrical relation is created whereby the speaker takes a superior position:

(101) I think Ade is in for a quite a treat at the Emirates!! Should keep your mouth shut son!!

(*Sun Online*, September 18, 2009, "Adebayor\_Why\_I\_lost\_it\_0025")

*Mate* a term for a friend or companion, on the other hand, creates the idea of equality (OED, entry *mate*, n). However, in comments like example (102) it creates a contradiction. It is clear that the speaker "19soon" and the addressee "DaveDownUnder" do not appear to be *mates* at all since they are from opposing soccer fan clubs.

(102) DaveDownUnder... Do you think the Arsenal supporters would have acted like they did if Ronald McDonald hadn't run 80 yards to celebrate in front of them? Ask yourself the question mate is that a possibility you might be interested looking into!!!! When you look into it make sure you take your BLINKERS OFF!!

(*Sun Online*, September 18, 2009, "Adebayor\_Why\_I\_lost\_it\_0040")

Finally, *dude* can also be used to ridicule (OED, entry *dude*, n.) a person like in the following example where user “BHusseinObummer” attacks Muntazer al-Zaidi, a journalist who recounts in the article why he threw a shoe at former President George W. Bush, by claiming:

(103) Your aim sucks dude

(*Guardian Online*, September 19, 2009, “Why\_I\_threw\_0004”)

Name-calling of the categories religion/politics, looks, scatology as well as animal-based and sexual/sexists forms are straightforward again. I would like to discuss name-calling of the category “respect”. Here we can note a contradiction between the level of deference that is paid to a person and verbal treatment of the person that follows. The addressee may understand this surface politeness as inappropriate. However, whether it could also be understood as face threatening is questionable in this special case.

(104) Indeed sir your unsupported accusation simply shows you to be a liar.

(*Express Online*, September 19, 2009, “Should\_super\_heads\_0033”)

In summary, while I would like to stress again that linguistic features should not be understood by default as inherently impolite, name-calling can be a powerful tool in the context of personal attacks to reinforce evaluations of impoliteness i.e. they help to secure an “impoliteness uptake” (Culpeper 2011). They are especially forceful because they devalue aspects of a person’s identity and communicate a dislike of one’s addressee on record.

#### 4.8.2. Case study: Name-calling of key actors on Sun Online

In the article “How the internet created an age of rage” by Adams Tim (*Guardian Online*, July 24, 2011), an English comedian called Stewart Lee shares his concerns about the virtual verbal “rage” that he is confronted with on various blog sites and response sections across the web. Not only comedians but all kind of individuals, private and publicly-known figures (i.e. celebrities, politicians, athletes) can become the target of commentators’ personal attacks including name-calling. In other words, here the attacks are not targeted against a participant in the immediate communicative situation of the reader response discussions (i.e. the journalists or co-commentators) but at the individuals who feature in an article. I call them key actors. My data across

the five news sites is no exception here. Despite the fact that key actors are not likely to respond or ever read the comments by hundreds of contributors across the news sites, commentators offend key actors on a regular basis. A case study from my data set will illustrate this point. The focus will be on the different types of name-calling that occurred in one discussion thread to personally attack a key actor.

On September 07, 2009, *Sun Online* published an article on Jordan (officially called Katie Price), a British model and reality TV star, and her then current boyfriend Alex Reid, a martial artist and actor. Both could be called English z-list celebrities. The article discussed their attendance as spectators at a cage-fight and the news that there the couple got into an argument with two other individuals. The argument resulted in a physical assault on Price and Reid. While the article only attracted 3 personal attacks that were aimed at co-commentators to defend Katie Price and Alex Reid, 42 comments included personal attacks against the two key actors in the article. Most of the comments ridiculed the couple by claiming that they found the incident very enjoyable or that it served them right. Others accused them of just wanting the publicity. Some users also commented negatively on their looks and manners and portrayed Katie Price as a bad mother, who rather enjoys herself with her boyfriend than taking care of her kids. In sum, 17 comments included different types of name-calling to attack the key actors as illustrated in Table 35. A total of 24 occurrences were registered. Only *chavs* occurred twice. All other instances of name-calling were one-off creations by commentators. Name-calling related to 6 topic areas. Of these, 5 instances of name-calling referred to more than 1 category (*chavs*, *orange horseface*, *ugly parasite leach*, *plastic tramp*, *tango tramp*).

**Table 35.** Name-calling of key actors on *Sun Online*: Kathie Price and Alex Reid

Topic areas of name-calling	Kathy Price (Jordan)	Alex Reid	Both
Animal-based	<i>orange horseface</i>	<i>ugly parasitic leach, gutter rat</i>	
Character	<i>worst mother of the year</i>	<i>Neanderthal, big head</i>	<i>chavs</i>
General		<i>awful low life boyfriend</i>	<i>a very classy pair, comedians, vile pair, awful couple, Trash with cash, low life Z listers</i>
Intellect		<i>(Alex) prat</i>	<i>idiots</i>
Looks	<i>orange horseface, plastic tramp, plastic tart, outspan orange</i>	<i>ugly parasitic leach</i>	<i>chavs</i>
Sexual/sexist	<i>plastic tramp, tango tramp</i>	<i>no-class porn actor</i>	

Note: misspellings are in the original



For example in the category “Looks”, users described Katie Price as *orange horseface*, *plastic tramp*, *plastic tart* and *outspan orange*. These portrayals hint at Price’s rather tanned skin colour and the fact that she has undergone numerous plastic surgeries in the past. Name-calling labels of the category “Sexual/sexist” picture her as *plastic tramp* or *tango tramp*. These expressions negatively insinuate that Price had a lot of different partners since her break up with her former husband. Finally, she is also called *worst mother of the year*. Here the commentator suggests that she does not take good care of her three kids since the divorce. All of these name-calling instances are powerful face threats that may be damaging to a person’s (public) reputation. The same is true for her partner. Alex Reid is described as *ugly parasitic leach* and *gutter rat* as well as *Neanderthal* and *low life*. These identity labels may be interpreted as an indirect derogatory judgment of Reid’s profession as a *martial artist* and *kickboxer*. In some cases, commentators refer to both individuals at the same time. Two users refer to them as *chavs*. A *chav* is a derogative British slang word to refer to a “young person of a type characterized by brash and loutish behaviour and the wearing of designer-style clothes (esp. sportswear); usually with connotations of a low social status” (OED, entry *chav*, n). The other name-calling incidences in the category “General” are either ironic labels (*a very classy pair*, *comedians*) or phrases to express an overall contempt (e.g. *vile pair*, *Trash with cash*).

In summary, while the discussion thread did not score high in terms of face threatening personal attacks towards co-commentators or the journalist, a very different picture emerges when we include the third dimension of face threats against key actors. The amount of name-calling indicates a high level of hostility towards the key figures and thus a high potential for impoliteness evaluations. From a methodological point of view this third dimension thus promises to give new insights into possible forms of impoliteness in a computer-mediated context. It also helps to explore whether face threats against key actors can truly be considered impolite given that they are not part of the immediate communicative setting but nevertheless have a public reputation to defend.



## 5. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

In this chapter, I will revisit my research questions and give a summary of the key arguments and main results of this study. In a final step, I will establish the relevance of my research for the field of impoliteness studies, discuss limitations in my study and provide input for areas of future research.

### 5.1. The research questions and key arguments revisited

In chapter 2., to understand the nature of the data investigated in this study, the theoretical discussion of the core characteristics of mass media communication allowed me to answer the research question *Where can we situate the interactively designed reader responses in a mass media context?* It was discovered that the traditional concept of mass media communication needs to be modified to account for new communicative possibilities developing in the online space. Most importantly, communication tools such as reader responses change the role and communicative possibilities of the news reader and thus the overall communicative situation in mass media communication. It was noted that the interactive communication modes provided by newspapers allow users to take on more influential discursal roles and guarantee much stronger speaking rights in the mass communication cycle. However, it was also argued that despite an increasing range of tools to allow for interactive exchanges between journalists and users as well as users among themselves, not all interactions on news sites are truly interactive. The concept of “pseudo-participation”, the artificially created feeling of a symmetrical communication between journalist and news consumer, as known from traditional media (e.g. radio phone-ins) thus did not completely disappear with the advent of new discussion platforms online. The main argument was that the level of interaction is not an inherent quality of a technical means to communicate but depends on the manner how participants use these tools (cf. also Hoffmann 2010; Schultz 2000). Also, the fact that reader response communication takes place in an institutionally controlled news environment dictates the amount and type of interaction that takes place on these platforms between journalists and users (e.g. the newspaper’s editorial and moderation powers, the journalist’s time constraints to engage with users). Based on previous literature and mainly inspired by Schultz (2000), I suggested a more fine-grained conceptualisation

of interactivity that distinguishes between technical interactivity and different levels of social interaction. Here a distinction was made between human-to-device interaction (i.e. technical interactivity, personalisation) and human-to-human interaction. The latter can be divided into interactive-reactive and truly interactive interactions. Especially the second concept was useful in the empirical analysis of the interactive structure of conflictive impolite reader responses as will be discussed in more detail below.

Chapter 3. then was meant to provide a comprehensive theoretical review and discussion of the field of linguistic (im)politeness in general and to account more specifically for the phenomenon within a computer-mediated context. A first research question was elaborated on here, namely, *What is the interplay between politeness and impoliteness?* It was discovered that impoliteness is no longer viewed as the binary opposite of politeness. Impoliteness should be studied in its own right in order to receive the attention it has for a long time been deprived of. However, I also argued that it is crucial to study impoliteness by building on the insights gained in the field of politeness. In line with Culpeper (2011) and Kienpointner (1997), it was concluded that viewing impoliteness and politeness as a scalar concept appears to be most fruitful.

The next research question, *How can impoliteness be defined?* was meant to demonstrate the ongoing conceptual battle over the very notion of impoliteness. A review of seven current definitions, of which Culpeper's (2011) appears to be the most elaborate to date, showed that different conceptualisations have largely to do with the different theoretical mind-set that scholars adhere to (e.g. rapport management, relational work approach, genre approach). Nevertheless, a number of similarities among the individual definitions were worked out and core concepts for a conceptualisation identified. Especially the notions of face, intention and appropriateness remain the most important tools to define impoliteness. Despite the fact that the definitional struggle is not over yet, the chapter closes with my own broad definition of impoliteness, which was an attempt to also include elements of the previously introduced definitions in this chapter. At the same time the definition wanted to do justice to the type of data investigated in this study.

The discussion of different conceptualisations raised a number of research questions that I dealt with in the consecutive sections. It was hoped that an exploration of these questions demonstrates current theoretical trends and answers to

these questions be a guide to a better understanding of the notion of impoliteness. One of the core questions that any researcher needs to ask themselves before they set out to explore impoliteness is: *What can be gained from a first order or second order approach?* A review of the existing literature revealed that neither a strict first order nor a strict second order approach may be the best way forward in future. Both types of approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. Also, more recent frameworks successfully demonstrated that it is possible to combine a first order and second order approach in a fruitful way to gain a more comprehensive understanding of impoliteness (e.g. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010a). The most relevant finding appears, however, that researchers need to realize that also different kinds of research questions/dimensions of impoliteness can be answered depending on the approach. In conclusion, I argued that none of the approaches should be seen as superior to the other. For the empirical investigation in the present study it was therefore also aimed for a combination of a first order and second order approach to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon at hand.

Having explored the fundamental division between the two research approaches, it was thought necessary to reflect on the core concept of face because recently doubts regarding its usefulness for an understanding of (im)politeness were formulated. The research question *What role and explanatory strength has the concept of face in impoliteness studies?* was answered as follows: Despite criticism regarding the explanatory strength of the concept of face, the notion remains the most powerful tool of investigation to grasp (im)politeness (e.g. Terkourafi 2008). However, it was also discovered that a binary distinction as introduced by Brown & Levinson ([1978] 1987) is in need of a re-conceptualisation (e.g. Bousfield 2008a). The trend goes towards seeing the two concepts along a continuum. Spencer-Oatey's (e.g. 2000) three-dimensional differentiation of face was suggested as a promising way forward since it allows for a more fine-grained analysis. It was also concluded that Spencer-Oatey's concept of sociality rights may nevertheless be captured with the concept of face; given the fact that face issues and sociality issues are so closely interlinked that we cannot really separate them most of the time. As such, I argued that her categories may also rather be seen along a continuum of multiple dimensions operating at the same time.

While researchers have lately scrutinized the value of the concept of face for (im)politeness studies, the same can be said for the concept of speaker intention. The

next section therefore explored *What role and explanatory strength the concept of intention still has in impoliteness studies*. It was discovered that the doubts regarding the usefulness of the concept of speaker intention goes beyond the field of impoliteness. Researchers have started to question the value of Gricean intentions for pragmatic studies overall (e.g. Haugh 2008). The traditional argument is that the speaker's intention to communicate impoliteness is a necessary component for a communicative act to be evaluated as impolite (e.g. Bousfield 2008a). However, post-modern researchers like Mills (2011), Culpeper (2011) Locher & Watts (2008) argued convincingly that the hearer's interpretation of an act, regardless of a speaker's intention, is also sufficient if not more important for evaluations of impoliteness. I concluded that speaker intention should nevertheless remain an important element for any consideration of impoliteness but it should not be viewed as a prerequisite for an act to be judged as impolite. I argued in line with Mills (2011) that a sole focus on speaker intention would seriously limit the spectrum of impoliteness that can be captured with this approach. The empirical study in this thesis appears to confirm this argument as will be discussed in more depth in the concluding remarks of chapter 4. I was able to show that commentators may also feel offended regardless of the fact that a speaker did not intend to offend this individual in the first place.

My research showed that the notion of inappropriateness is another concept that often turns up in impoliteness studies. I therefore asked the research question *How useful is the concept of inappropriateness in a study of impoliteness?* Previous research showed that scholars generally embraced the idea to conceptualize impoliteness as inappropriate behaviour in relation to the situational norms of a speech event. However, Culpeper (2011) also argued that one should not make the mistake to equate inappropriateness with impoliteness by default since there are also instances of inappropriate behaviour that will not attract impoliteness evaluations (e.g. wearing a coat on a hot summer day). I stated, based on Culpeper's (2011) concept of "reactive impoliteness", that counter attacks in impolite reader responses could then be viewed as appropriate since they are issued in defence rather than as an initial attack. In this context, the concept of inappropriateness would indeed not be so useful. However, I further argued that even reactive impoliteness does not exclude that participants may still experience such counter attacks as inappropriate. For example, the attacker may have found his/her initial attack justified but thinks it is inappropriate of his/her opponent to counter attack. In other words, contextually inappropriate and

appropriate communicative acts alike may lead to interpretations of impoliteness. Here Culpeper's (2011) own argument that "sanctioned" impoliteness does not automatically "neutralize" impoliteness fitted well. In summary, while I agree with Culpeper (2011) that the notion of inappropriateness may not be applicable to all cases of impoliteness to the same extent, I concluded that it nevertheless provides a very valuable instrument that helps us understand how participants reach judgments of impoliteness. I also believe that the concept of inappropriateness may appear a more promising tool than the notion of speaker intention in future. Especially, since intention reconstruction is much more difficult, inappropriateness seems also more useable as a concept for researchers to work with in empirical studies. Intentions always need to be reconstructed by default. However, at least some norms of appropriateness against which behaviour may be judged, are given in certain situations and thus can be identified more easily (e.g. netiquette rules).

A review of previous research also revealed that Spencer-Oatey's (2008) concept of "rapport management orientation" appears to be a promising answer to the research question *How can impoliteness be understood as a relational phenomenon?* Her framework is a useful tool to partly explain the link between relational factors and causes/evaluations of impoliteness. Based on her framework, I hypothesized that participants may be more likely to offend others in reader response sections because they do not know each other and are not likely to interact in the future again. Therefore, they do not feel the need to enhance or maintain these relations. In other cases, a participant may want to challenge a relation with another participant because of a previous offence and thus feel a real need to cause disharmony.

Answering the research question *Which contextual, medium and person-related factors play a role for the interpretation of impoliteness in CMC?* is seen as a major contribution of this thesis for a better understanding of impoliteness in the online environment. The discussion was also meant to provide guidance for a comprehensive analysis of impoliteness in reader response data. I argued that the discussed contextual, medium- and person related features help making convincing claims about impoliteness and more specifically impolite personal attacks, also in situations where participants' first hand evaluations of impoliteness are not available in reader responses. Grimshaw's concept (1990) of "potential" (im)politeness was a guiding principle here. I suggested the following dimensions: the activity type/CofP, the situational norms, meta-pragmatic evaluations of participants, person-related features

including, power, rights and role-related factors next to historical relations among participants, a person's personality and socio-demographic user profiles. Next, also medium-related features including the anonymous and public context as well as the polylogue structure of reader responses were explored and considered of importance. Last, the discoursal embedding of impoliteness in larger stretches of discourse (i.e. conflict development) and the use of specific linguistic devices (i.e. name-calling and swearing) were thought to complete the list of variables to support claims about "potential" impoliteness in reader responses. These last two dimensions were explored in much detail in the empirical part of this thesis. I do not intend to give a summary of each individual factor here but would like to refer to sections 3.8.1 to 3.8.8. Nevertheless, I want to make a few concluding remarks regarding a number of factors. Both the concepts of activity type and CofP offer the analysts pivotal tools to systematically capture the nature of a speech situation and also define sanctioned, "allowable" behaviours in such settings. In regard to existing norms of a discourse, it was discovered that researchers need to think beyond the situational norms of an activity type and also consider a person's individual norm expectations which evolve through personal experiences over the years (e.g. Locher 2004, 2012). I also want to highlight here again that while norms offer a reliable source for judgments of (in)appropriateness, one should not forget that they are also subject to re-negotiation and thus may change over time. Regarding meta-pragmatic evaluations on impoliteness, I would like to stress their centrality for any study of impoliteness. However, researchers should not limit themselves to this type of investigation as problems are also attached to the use of meta-pragmatics (e.g. meta-comments only occur very sparingly). The fact that person-related features also play a significant role in impoliteness studies underlines the need for a closer collaboration with sociologists and psychologists to grasp the phenomenon as linguistic and socio-cultural. Last, while we have long moved beyond a technologically determined view of explaining linguistic phenomena in CMC, I conclude that medium-related factors are decisive for a proper understanding of the face dynamics and thus impoliteness in an online environment. I was able to demonstrate that the (pseudo)anonymity, the public setting and the polylogue structure affect face dynamics most.

Having concluded that evaluations of impoliteness are highly sensitive to contextual and situational variables, the question *whether we should reject the concepts of universal and inherent impoliteness as notions of the past* needed to be



answered. In line with Mills (2011) it can be concluded that (im)politeness will remain as a universal concept in many cultures but no overarching conclusions about cultural groups can and should even be attempted as such an approach is set up for failure. In regard to the concept of inherent (im)politeness I concluded that the concept of inherent (im)politeness is indeed no longer a valid concept. However, Culpeper's (2011) idea of "conventionalized" linguistic formulae should not be rejected as they have a strong tendency to be interpreted as impolite in number of contexts. Having said that, I also argued that we should still refrain from using the term "inherent" in connection with these formulae as it suggests that impoliteness then is something intrinsically present and stable at all times.

Having explored the theoretical research questions above, I also wanted to explore whether other forms of negative behaviours commonly associated with CMC and previously discussed in other research fields may share similarities or overlap with the linguistic concept of impoliteness: *Is it possible to differentiate personally abusive impoliteness from other forms of conflictive and offensive behaviour online?* I discovered that especially the concepts of flaming and trolling should not be ignored when investigating impoliteness in an online context. As a review of previous research on flaming and trolling revealed, both phenomena are partly described by means of the same terminology and thus share conceptual links. I showed that theoretical descriptions of flaming can often quite easily be situated in the conceptual space of impoliteness. Further, I suggested that what is often described as flaming in an online environment, could be evaluated as impolite discourse in a face-to-face situation. I concluded that the phenomenon overlaps with discussions of impoliteness to such an extent that they cannot be safely conceptually differentiated at this stage. Rather flaming could be viewed as a form of online impoliteness and thus a sub-category of the spectrum of impolite behaviour. Having said that, future research will have to show if flaming is indeed only an online phenomenon. In any case, what has been described as flaming behaviour is face threatening and thus may attract evaluations of impoliteness. The fact that some users apply flaming for their personal amusement is not strong enough a factor to conclude that speaker intention is sufficient to distinguish the two concepts, also because personal amusement does not play a role in each conceptualisation of flaming to date. In conclusion, flaming may only be distinguished from impoliteness if the respective person admits so and/or sufficient contextual information (e.g. user behaviour over a period of time) is

available. At this stage, only the ludic form of “stage flaming” can be differentiated from the concept of impoliteness. In regard to trolling, I concluded that the phenomenon can be conceptually differentiated from flaming. However, also here contextual information is needed to identify a troller successfully. With trolling, the personal entertainment factor of the troller seems to be much stronger than with flaming. Also, trolls carefully pick their target (often newbies) and clearly always have an intention to cause harm while at the same time faking goodwill. From an impoliteness perspective, trolling behaviour has a strong face threatening potential. However, also here an analysis of language behaviour alone is not sufficient. Only a long-term historical analysis of user behaviour and other contextual information may allow to identify individuals as potential trolls. The discussion of different types of offensive online behaviour also revealed that a close collaboration with sociologists and psychologists may be fruitful to discover the reasons for these phenomena.

After a theoretical exploration of impoliteness, this study empirically investigated the phenomenon. The first research question *What is the participation framework and communicative situation in reader responses?* set the scene for the consecutive analysis. Using Burger’s (2005) traditional scheme for mass media communication, I postulated an advanced model to describe the complex participation framework and communicative situation in reader responses. Such a new model was necessary since traditional models are not able to account for the interchangeable discursual roles and communicative possibilities that we find in newer forms of online mass media communication. Such an advanced model was also important from an impoliteness perspective. It helped to understand who can act as offender and who may feel offended in reader response interactions. In the model I proposed an inner and an outer frame of mass media communication and showed that the formerly fixed borders of traditional mass media communication between the passive audience and active communicators (i.e. the journalists) are no longer stable and have started to blur online. Three groups of communicators were identified (journalists, commentators, members of the moderation team). The group of recipients is larger. Five types were identified including the previously mentioned parties as well as the general readership and key actors in articles. I argued that it is especially important to understand the different types of recipient roles for conflictive impolite exchanges. Here I made a distinction between intended and actual recipients to pinpoint those participants who may feel offended during a debate. In doing so I was able to explain the phenomenon

that unintended (i.e. actual) recipients of personal attacks may also feel offended and see the need to react to such impolite exchanges. Another aspect I considered of importance was the distinction between direct and indirect address of intended recipients. By indirect address I meant that a user talks about an intended recipient with a third party (e.g. another user or the general readership). The communicative situation of reader responses allows for a regular use of the latter form, and I argued that personally offensive attacks not directly addressed at the intended recipient are nevertheless face threatening since the target of the offence can always be in virtual “earshot”.

Having defined the communicative situation of reader responses, I first wanted to explore how impolite personal attacks are embedded in their wider discoursal context. Since the phenomenon does not evolve in isolation I thought this a fundamental need in the study. To answer the research question *Which sequential interactive structures are characteristic of impolite conflictive exchanges?* Bousfield’s (2008a) framework proved to be a valuable tool to analyse online reader responses and to track the overall interactive structure of impolite conflictive exchanges from the start to the end of an exchange. Where necessary Bousfield’s scheme was modified to the specific needs of the computer-mediated data studied here, and reasons for these adjustments were discussed at length (e.g. difficulties for identifying trigger events or instances of silence). The most interesting findings were made regarding the different types of offensive response strategies to an initial personal attack. The concept of personal attacks was used to capture face threatening offences (see also discussion of the next research question). I was able to show that offensive strategies were much more frequent than defensive strategies. This finding contradicts Bousfield’s results for the type of face-to-face discourses the scholar had analysed. Based on these findings I concluded that the results are likely to be related to the fact that reader response debates are a different activity type. This circumstance may be largely responsible for a different conflict culture online. In fact, this argument may hold true for most of the strategies discovered in the data. Also, with my more fine-grained categories for offensive strategies I was also able to provide evidence that participants do not only counter attack an offender to save their own face. There were numerous instances in which commentators uttered a counter attack against an offender despite the fact that he/she had not been the intended recipient of the initial personal attack. I attributed this finding mainly to the complex communicative situation of reader responses where

a large number of participants (actual recipients) are witness to exchanges among other users. I noted that these offences may be experienced as inappropriate to the extent that an actual recipient feels the need to stand up for the victim of an attack and respond to the offence with a counter attack. While friendships among commentators and admiration of a journalist or key actor may partly explain this phenomenon it must be assumed that there are also cases where participants did not previously have a relational bonding. It is therefore striking that despite the relative anonymity and distance among participants in reader responses, actual recipients still have the urge to counter in the stead of either a journalist, a commentator or key actor. Most importantly these results also confirmed that a person's face is essentially a relational phenomenon. Face threats are thus not only related to an individual's face, but there is always the possibility that another person feels threatened as well. Face sensitivities are thus not only anchored in the individual but also motivated by group dynamics and group concerns.

Another major finding was that overall a much smaller set of response strategies were used than Bousfield had discovered. Results also showed that conflict resolution strategies, with the exception of 3<sup>rd</sup> party intervention through moderation, are not characteristic of this activity type. The result was confirmed by the investigation of the extended corpus of reader responses. It was concluded that this finding is also most probably related to the nature of the discourse type.

In summary, I concluded that explanations for the limited set of response patterns and conflict resolution patterns as well as low frequencies for some strategies (e.g. apologies) were likely related to the activity type, the communicative situation, medium factors, power dynamics and low relational bonding for most participants in reader response sections.

Finally, the analysis of the duration (e.g. number of turns) of these conflictive impolite exchanges revealed that the bulk of interactions were largely reactive rather than interactive dialogic exchanges. I built here on Schultz's (2000) continuum of reactive-interactive exchanges. With the results I was able to demonstrate that the possible levels of interaction are not directly related to the functionality of a technical means but depend on the participants' preferences of using these tools (cf. Hoffmann 2010; Rafaeli & Sudweeks 1997). I also provided evidence that the interaction between journalists and commentators is very low, and thus the exchange with the newspaper audience remains largely theoretical and pseudo-interactive. *Express*

*Online* was the only newspaper that stood out with more interactive patterns. Here I noted that a small and evolving CofP may be the main reason, rather than the functionalities of a technology, for more interactive discussions and engagement in impolite conflictive exchanges. Last, contrary to my expectations, the analysis revealed that the levels of interaction in conflictive exchanges appear, to a degree, to be independent of the asynchronous nature of reader response sections.

The answer to the next research question forms the backbone of the entire empirical analysis: *How can we identify and conceptualize (potentially) impolite linguistic realizations of users in online reader responses?* I proposed to capture potentially face threatening offences with the concept of personal attacks, which proved very suitable to discover and conceptualize different patterns of impoliteness in the genre of online reader responses. The methodological approach built on Walton's (1998) scheme of *ad hominem* attacks and was complemented by a number of strategies that emerged during the bottom-up analysis of the data. In total, I discovered 12 different types of face threatening personal attacks in the corpus. As argued elsewhere, my methodology is largely a second order approach in its design since I work with preconceived categories. However, as I demonstrated, I heavily draw on contextual, medium and person-related factors to support my analysis. Based on this multi-dimensional approach I concluded that there is sufficient evidence that these personal attacks have the potential to be interpreted as impolite in reader response interactions. An evaluation of the personal attacks from Spencer-Oatey's (e.g. 2008) point of view showed that personal attacks are primarily threats to the quality face of a person. However, indirectly they also are an infringement of the sociality rights of a person (i.e. equity and association rights). In regard to frequencies, one of the findings was that 4 out of the 12 strategies already accounted for almost 60% of all the personal attacks produced in the data.

In total, the number of comments with personal attacks remained below the 50% mark for all five newspapers, but frequencies for individual newspapers varied greatly (between 5% and 46%). Also, personal attacks were not evenly spread across discussion threads. Different patterns for attacks against journalists compared to commentators may partly also be related to the fact that the personal prominence of journalists as authors of articles (i.e. amount of personal information, type of article they produced) differed across the five newspapers.

The sub-research question *How do users themselves define what actually constitute inappropriate behaviour?* could partly be answered with one of the personal attack categories established in my data set. The personal attack type “You lack discussion manners” included all instances where a commentator went on record and negatively evaluated the discussion behaviour of another poster. While they were evaluated as personal attacks towards the person who did not adhere to the norms of the discussion, these attacks also provided useful meta-pragmatic evidence from participants themselves as to what they considered inappropriate behaviour in reader response debates. As such it helped to identify situational norms of appropriateness.

With the second sub-research question in regard to personal attacks I wanted to find out whether frequency patterns were also explainable by looking at individual user profiles in more detail. I asked the question: *Do individual users stand out in their negative communicative behaviour and if yes, how is this to be interpreted?* I identified that especially *Express Online* stands out for its small number of unique users who used personal attacks in conflictive exchanges. More specifically, one user alone, called “Welsh\_Dragon”, was responsible for 38% of all the personal attack in this sub-corpus. A profile check also revealed that this user had already been highly active on the site for a long period of time. I provided evidence that the user’s behaviour suggests that he/she may engage in offensive encounters with others for his/her personal amusement. In conclusion, I suggested that the user’s behaviour may be tentatively linked to the concept of a flamer. However, I also added that the identification of user behaviour as flaming remains difficult and is loaded with conceptual difficulties as explained in the theoretical section of this thesis. In any case, linguistic evidence needs to be supported with extensive extra-linguistic evidence to make reasonable claims. The comment history of a user, interaction patterns and meta-pragmatic hints regarding the behaviour of users as collected in this case study appear to be a fruitful way forward.

To answer the research question *How are the linguistic devices swearing and name-calling used in personally abusive impolite reader responses?* the empirical investigation concluded with an analysis of swearing and name-calling. These two linguistic devices are marked features that often surface in impoliteness studies. I argued that while both features are not inherently impolite, they can potentially reinforce evaluations of impoliteness when used in combination with personal attacks. I drew on Culpeper’s (2011:136) idea that taboo words can act as intensifiers to

“[help] secure an impoliteness uptake”. Also Locher & Watts’ (2008) concept of “affective linguistic realisations” was useful to show that swearing may help to gain insight into a speaker’s mind and his/her negative evaluation of another person’s behaviour. Based on a bottom-up analysis of my data, I distinguished between intensifying, exclamatory and substituting types of swearing. The analysis showed that swearing in reader responses and more specifically in personal attacks is successfully used to vent negative emotions and flag an attacker’s negative attitude towards another commentator. I noted that swearing, and here especially the exclamatory type, may be more consciously planned i.e. more intentionally used since commentators communicate via a written medium.

Importantly, I observed that swearing is, just like impoliteness in general, influenced by situational and contextual variables that motivate the amount of swearing as well as hearer evaluations of this behaviour. I discussed, for example, the moderation and netiquette norms as well as the rather informal but public character of reader response communication which may have an effect. Especially, the analysis of euphemistic swearing demonstrated that users are aware of existing situational norms. Additionally, these disguised forms of swearing provided glimpses into which expressions users themselves may judge as offensive and thus not appropriate for the situational context. I concluded that swearing cannot be understood as inherently impolite but judged within its context may be understood as impolite in specific situations.

The second part of the linguistic feature analysis focused on a special type of swearing, namely, name-calling. Similarly to swearing in general, name-calling is also heavily context-dependent and situational factors, as mentioned for swearing, are also applicable to name-calling. Despite the fact that they also should not be considered inherently impolite, I stated that they may be forceful means in personal attacks to trigger impoliteness evaluations since they devalue aspects of an addressee’s identity and communicative on record a general dislike of the recipient (cf. also Culpeper 2011; Ljung 2011). Based on a bottom-up analysis, I discovered 14 different types of name-calling categories in personal attacks. Most of these name-calling expressions had either a belittling or ridiculing effect and simply showed that a person was clearly not taken seriously. In other cases, name-calling demonstrated a low level of deference. In terms of frequencies, out of 498 comments with personal

attacks targeted at commentators or journalists, 114 comments (23%) included name-calling and 49 comments (10%) included swearing.

The final section of my empirical investigation focused on key actors in articles. I had not considered them in the other dimensions of my data analysis since they are, as I explained, not part of the immediate communicative setting. However, since key actors are also frequent targets of offences, I conducted a small case study on name-calling in one discussion thread on *Sun Online* to demonstrate the complexity of potentially impolite communication in reader responses. Results showed that while the discussion thread was low in personal attacks towards co-commentators or the journalist, a very different picture emerged when I included the dimension of face threats against key actors. I concluded that the extensive use of name-calling indicates a high level of hostility towards key actors and thus a high potential for impoliteness since it damages a person's (public) reputation. It remains to be solved, however, whether we can truly talk about impoliteness in such cases since the targeted person is not at all present at the communicative event.

## **5.2. Relevance of my research for the field of impoliteness studies**

By providing answers to the research questions above, the relevance of my research for the field of impoliteness studies can be broadly summarized as follows: On the one hand, the in-depth theoretical investigation of the concept of impoliteness and more specifically the much needed consideration of the phenomenon in an online context hoped to enrich the present theoretical understanding of impoliteness and give it the scholarly attention it deserves. On the other hand, the empirical analysis provided a broad framework to conceptualize and describe personally abusive impolite exchanges among users in the reader response sections of newspapers. Thereby the study hoped to broaden the methodological perspective on impoliteness in practice and more specifically capture the dynamics and dimensions of impoliteness in a novel and uniquely hybrid context where traditional tools for evaluating impoliteness in face-to-face interaction could not be consistently applied.

## **5.3. The limitations to the study**

A limitation to this study is related to the type of data analysed. Since this study focused on reader response communication, generalisations to other forms of CMC are limited. Especially in relation to situational, medium and person-related factors



that may influence realisations and interpretations of impoliteness a careful analysis of each new type is necessary since online forms of communications can differ largely in regard to these dimensions (e.g. Twitter, Facebook etc.).

A further limitation is related to the nature of the data. Given the circumstance that newspapers moderate reader response debates at any point in time, it is very likely that researchers cannot obtain a complete picture of the communicative spectrum that users utilize in these discussions. In turn, this circumstance affects the generalisations which can be drawn from the data. It is very likely that the most extreme forms of offensive user behaviour were not captured or if it was, then just by coincidence. In chapter 4. I suggested a number of methods to work around this problem such as the use of quoted fragments from already deleted comments. Again, this is only a small remedy for the problem. Therefore, the most sensible advice here is to treat generalisations with caution.

Also, I worked with the concept of personal attacks to conceptualize impoliteness in reader responses. While this concept proved very useful to capture impoliteness patterns in reader responses, future research may show that there are possibly other types of impoliteness in reader responses that cannot be captured with this concept.

Finally, with my study I cannot counter Garcés-Conejos Blitvich's (2010b) criticism that most of the research on (im)politeness to date is "Anglo-centric". However, it is also a fact that the majority of online communication is conducted in the English language and is often used as a lingua franca as is also assumed for the participants in the present study. While the study only includes reader responses written in the English language, the newspapers are globally accessed and thus it can be safely assumed that not all of the participants who produced these comments share the same cultural backgrounds, values and face sensitivities. Such aspects of heterogeneity were taken into account in my study. Having said this, the concept of personal attacks may not be applicable to the same extent to all CofPs.

#### **5.4. Areas of future research**

A multitude of future research paths result from this study. I will discuss them in line with the organizational structure of my thesis. From a theoretical point of view, firstly, the role of intention and appropriateness as well as conceptualisations of face have received detailed attention in this study. However, one needs to further scrutinize these notions to enrich our understanding of the concept of impoliteness. Also, this

study suggested a wide range of contextual, situational and person-related factors which were thought necessary for a well-founded study of impoliteness in reader responses. However, the creation of a framework which allows an even more systematic compilation and assessment of factors that may influence realisations and evaluations of impoliteness for a multitude of data material appears fruitful. Such a methodological tool would also allow for a closer investigation of the interplay of these factors and let us explore to what extent the individual factors should be considered when impoliteness evaluations occur. Further, the link between flaming, trolling and impoliteness in an online context deserves more attention. With my discussion of this subject I hoped to demonstrate that a look beyond the concept of impoliteness in the online space is fruitful. However, it also became clear that the conceptual connection between flaming, trolling and impoliteness is not straightforward. Further studies may possibly achieve a more systematic differentiation between the concepts.

Based on the empirical investigation of the data, also a number of future research desiderata emerged. On the one hand, a refinement of the catalogue of personal attack categories may prove useful depending on the needs of future data to be analysed. With regard to the intended recipients of personal attacks in reader response debates, I think it is vital to study personal abuse against key actors in articles more systematically. While my study gave a detailed insight into offences against co-commentators and journalists, attacks against key actors were only considered in one of the case studies. Thus, to obtain a complete picture of the dynamics of impoliteness in reader responses, a study of key actors is desirable. Thereby, one can also explore in how far personal attacks against key actors can also be evaluated as potentially impolite given the fact that these individuals are not participants of the immediate communicative situation in reader responses.

The present study focused on two marked “affective linguistic expressions” (cf. Locher & Watts 2008), namely swearing and name-calling in connection with personal attacks. While it was repeatedly stressed that these linguistic devices should not be considered impolite by default, it seems fruitful to broaden the scope to other emotionally charged linguistic features including, for example, the use of challenging rhetorical questions (cf. also Bousfield 2008a), negatively connotated expressions or the use of repetition to gain insight into the speaker’s emotional attitude towards his/her addressee and the elicitation of impoliteness judgements. Bednarek (2008),

Caffi & Janney (1994) and Langlotz & Locher (2010, 2012) provide extensive input for this research area.

From a first order impoliteness perspective it would prove especially useful to investigate reader responses that moderators deleted from the discussion threads following a break with the established netiquette rules. Having said that, the use of such data for scholarly research may prove problematic from the newspapers' legal liability since comments may potentially also include strongly racist or otherwise homophobic remarks whose further publication could put the newspaper in legal jeopardy.

A diachronic perspective on impoliteness in reader responses also seems desirable. Thanks to the extensive online archives of newspapers like *Guardian Online*, a comparison from the introduction of this form of communication almost ten years ago to present day reader response debates can show possible changes in users' linguistic behaviour and more specifically changing situational norms and realization of impoliteness.

Finally, given the fact that impoliteness is not just understood as a linguistic but a complex socio-cultural phenomenon, I think the time is ripe to also consider cross-disciplinary collaborations with sociologists, cultural scientists and psychologists to make sure we are not just holding one end of the stick on impoliteness.



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## APPENDIX

**Table 36.** Sample of a tagged reader response in the XML database

XML coding scheme: Data example
<pre> &lt;item id="Sun090909_Joy_as_kop_fan_0016" type="comment" counterAttackFaceKeyActor="Sun090909_Joy_as_kop_fan_0016"&gt; &lt;header&gt; &lt;sourceName&gt;Sun&lt;/sourceName&gt; &lt;newsCategory&gt;News&lt;/newsCategory&gt; &lt;url&gt;<a href="http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article2628821.ece">http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article2628821.ece</a>&lt;/url&gt; &lt;author&gt; &lt;authorName&gt;Ossie123&lt;/authorName&gt; &lt;authorLocation&gt;ma&lt;/authorLocation&gt; &lt;/author&gt; &lt;datePublished&gt;090909&lt;/datePublished&gt; &lt;dateCollected&gt;040210&lt;/dateCollected&gt; &lt;/header&gt; &lt;text&gt; &lt;impoliteSequence type="cognitionAH_2"&gt;Some terrible comments here. Anyone with half a brain knows he is innocent. Wait til the full story comes out before talking rubbish.&lt;/ impoliteSequence&gt; &lt;impoliteSequence type="moralsAH_2"&gt;Can't believe some football 'fans' want him to stay in prison simply because he is a Pool fan.&lt;/impoliteSequence&gt; &lt;impoliteSequence type="cognitionAH_2"&gt;Never mind the FACT he is innocent. Keep him locked up. Very intelligent of you!&lt;/impoliteSequence&gt; &lt;/text&gt; &lt;/item&gt; </pre>

**Table 37.** Levels of analysis: 0 to 3<sup>182</sup>

Level 0 Newspaper	Level 1 News topic	Level 2 Item structure	Level 3 Item structure
<i>Guardian Online</i> (Up)	Celebrities	<i>Article</i>	Headline
<i>Telegraph Online</i> (Up)	Economics		Author ID (name & location)
<i>Express Online</i> (Mid)	Environment		Publication date & time
<i>Mail Online</i> (Mid)	Odd		Picture of author (opt.)
<i>Sun Online</i> (Down)	Politics		Article body (one or more units)*
	Society & Religion		Invitation to comment
	Sports	<i>User comment</i>	User ID (Pseudonym/name & location)
			Picture (opt.)
			Publication date & time
			Comment body (one or more units)
			Link: Report comment
			Link: Recommend comment

\*Note: May include multimedia features (videos, picture gallery, user comments, hyperlinks etc.)

<sup>182</sup> Visualization of different levels of analysis are inspired by Locher (2006b:60).

**Table 38.** Levels of analysis: 4 to 7

Level 4 Sequential discourse	Level 5 Personal attacks	Level 6 Victim of personal attacks	Level 7 Item structure
<i>Trigger:</i> Offending event	Bias	Journalist	Swearing
<i>Start:</i> 1st personal attack	Cognition	Co-commentator(s)	Name-calling
<i>Middle:</i> OFFENSIVE RESPONSE	Condescension & ridicule	Key actor in article	
Counter attack to defend	Discussion manners		
1) Self	Ignore & snub		
2) Key actor	Inconsistency		
3) Other commentator	Moderated		
4) Journalist	Morals & ethics		
DEFENSIVE RESPONSE	Perception of situation		
Ignore	Prudential judgment		
DO NOT RESPOND	Threats & warnings		
<i>End:</i> Withdrawal	Veracity		
Compromise			
3rd party intervention			

**Table 39.** Data set: Source details for the up-market newspapers *Guardian Online* and *Telegraph Online*

Newspaper	Topic	URL of article and associated discussion thread	ID code
Guardian Online	Environment	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/georgemonbiot/2009/sep/16/global-temperature-cooling">http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/georgemonbiot/2009/sep/16/global-temperature-cooling</a>	Guardian200909_Sceptics_seize
	Politics	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/17/why-i-threw-shoe-bush">http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/17/why-i-threw-shoe-bush</a>	Guardian190909_Why_I_threw
	Politics	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/08/2010-election-age-of-austerity">http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/08/2010-election-age-of-austerity</a>	Guardian090909_In_the_great_argument
	Politics	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/07/bnp-question-time">http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/07/bnp-question-time</a>	Guardian070909_The BNP_doesnt_deserve
	Society & Religion	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/20/drugs-britain-opinion-debate">http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/20/drugs-britain-opinion-debate</a>	Guardian200909_Leading_voices
	Society & Religion	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/18/bloomberg-smoking-ban-new-york">http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/18/bloomberg-smoking-ban-new-york</a>	Guardian180909_Smokers
	Society & Religion	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/sep/18/children-philosophy-childless">http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/sep/18/children-philosophy-childless</a>	Guardian190909_Not_doing
Telegraph Online	Celebrities	<a href="http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/simonheffer/6209206/The-gulf-between-a-Princess-and-a-Queen.html">http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/simonheffer/6209206/The-gulf-between-a-Princess-and-a-Queen.html</a>	Telegraph200909_The_gulf_between_a_Princess
	Economics	<a href="http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/6202911/The-Euro-why-Britain-is-still-better-off-out.html">http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/6202911/The-Euro-why-Britain-is-still-better-off-out.html</a>	Telegraph180909_The_Euro
	Economics	<a href="http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/financetopics/g20-summit/6203580/A-new-era-of-global-economic-co-operation.html">http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/financetopics/g20-summit/6203580/A-new-era-of-global-economic-co-operation.html</a>	Telegraph180909_A_new_era_of_global_economic
	Environment	<a href="http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthcomment/geoffrey-lean/6207647/Climate-change-campaigners-should-not-have-fixated-on-carbon-dioxide.html">http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthcomment/geoffrey-lean/6207647/Climate-change-campaigners-should-not-have-fixated-on-carbon-dioxide.html</a>	Telegraph190909_Climate_change_campaigners
	Politics	<a href="http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/6199726/Does-white-America-hate-Barack-Obama.html">http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/6199726/Does-white-America-hate-Barack-Obama.html</a>	Telegraph170909_Does_white_America_hate_Bara
	Politics	<a href="http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/borisjohnson/6148390/Brussels-is-a-shining-symbol-of-where-the-real-power-lies.html">http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/borisjohnson/6148390/Brussels-is-a-shining-symbol-of-where-the-real-power-lies.html</a>	Telegraph070909_Brussels_is_a_shining_symbol
	Society & Religion	<a href="http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/christopherhowse/6198784/The-relics-and-bones-that-bring-us-closer-to-God.html">http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/christopherhowse/6198784/The-relics-and-bones-that-bring-us-closer-to-God.html</a>	Telegraph170909_The_Relics_and_Bones

**Table 40.** Data set: Source details for the mid-market newspapers *Express Online* and *Mail Online*

Newspaper	Topic	URL of article and associated discussion thread	ID code
<i>Express Online</i>	Economics	<a href="http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/124550/Should-we-pay-our-armed-forces-more-">http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/124550/Should-we-pay-our-armed-forces-more-</a>	Express090909_Should_we_pay_more
	Economics	<a href="http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/127047/Should-super-heads-have-their-pay-curbed-">http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/127047/Should-super-heads-have-their-pay-curbed-</a>	Express190909_Should_super_heads
	Environment	<a href="http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/126614/Are-we-to-blame-for-climate-change-">http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/126614/Are-we-to-blame-for-climate-change-</a>	Express190909_Are_we_to_blame
	Politics	<a href="http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/124065/Is-it-time-to-bring-our-troops-home-">http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/124065/Is-it-time-to-bring-our-troops-home-</a>	Express090909_Is_it_time
	Politics	<a href="http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/125928/Should-public-services-have-to-suffer-as-Labour-cut-costs-">http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/125928/Should-public-services-have-to-suffer-as-Labour-cut-costs-</a>	Express180909_Should_public_services
	Society & Religion	<a href="http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/124790/Are-British-courts-too-soft-on-criminals-">http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/124790/Are-British-courts-too-soft-on-criminals-</a>	Express090909_Are_British_Courts
	Society & Religion	<a href="http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/123894/Is-there-too-much-swearing-on-TV-">http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/123894/Is-there-too-much-swearing-on-TV-</a>	Express070909_Is_there_too_much_swearing
<i>Mail Online</i>	Celebrities	<a href="http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1213845/Bloated-Bride-Wildenstein-looks-frightening-ever.html">http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1213845/Bloated-Bride-Wildenstein-looks-frightening-ever.html</a>	Mail170909_Bloated_Bride
	Celebrities	<a href="http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1213852/Katie-Price-violently-attacked-rape-ordeal-says-NEVER-celebrity-attacked-her.html">http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1213852/Katie-Price-violently-attacked-rape-ordeal-says-NEVER-celebrity-attacked-her.html</a>	Mail170909_Katie_violently_attacked
	Celebrities	<a href="http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1214802/Strictly-Come-Dancing-Backlash-begins-Alesha-Dixon-complaints-flood-BBC.html">http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1214802/Strictly-Come-Dancing-Backlash-begins-Alesha-Dixon-complaints-flood-BBC.html</a>	Mail200909_Strictly_come
	Politics	<a href="http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1214161/French-Jungle-raised-week-immigrants-told-You-England-anymore-Calais.html">http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1214161/French-Jungle-raised-week-immigrants-told-You-England-anymore-Calais.html</a>	Mail190909_French
	Politics	<a href="http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1211501/BNP-leader-invited-Question-Time.html">http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1211501/BNP-leader-invited-Question-Time.html</a>	Mail080909_BNP_leader
	Society & Religion	<a href="http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1211950/Premature-baby-left-die-doctors-mother-gives-birth-just-days-22-week-care-limit.html">http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1211950/Premature-baby-left-die-doctors-mother-gives-birth-just-days-22-week-care-limit.html</a>	Mail090909_Premature_baby
	Society & Religion	<a href="http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1211504/The-image-dying-U-S-soldier-sparked-furious-debate-Afghan-war-divided-America.html">http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1211504/The-image-dying-U-S-soldier-sparked-furious-debate-Afghan-war-divided-America.html</a>	Mail070909_The_image

**Table 41.** Data set: Source details for the down-market newspaper *Sun Online*

Newspaper	Topic	URL of article and associated discussion thread	ID code
<i>Sun Online</i>	Celebrities	<a href="http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/showbiz/tv/article2624838.ece">http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/showbiz/tv/article2624838.ece</a>	Sun070909_Jordan_decked
	Odd	<a href="http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article2642152.ece">http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article2642152.ece</a>	Sun170909_Mystery_beast
	Politics	<a href="http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article2628304.ece">http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article2628304.ece</a>	Sun090909_Fanatics_go_free
	Society & Religion	<a href="http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article2628821.ece">http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article2628821.ece</a>	Sun090909_Joy_as_kop_fan
	Sports	<a href="http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/sport/football/article2643002.ece">http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/sport/football/article2643002.ece</a>	Sun180909_Adebayor_Why_I_lost_it
	Sports	<a href="http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/sport/football/article2646219.ece">http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/sport/football/article2646219.ece</a>	Sun200909_Man_Utd
	Sports	<a href="http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/sport/football/article2624322.ece">http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/sport/football/article2624322.ece</a>	Sun070909_Bilic_keep_it_shut





## Curriculum vitae

Manuela Neurauter-Kessels was born 07 December 1979 in Innsbruck, Austria. She attended primary and secondary school in Inzing (1986 – 1994), Austria. Afterwards, she attended the HBLA für wirtschaftliche Berufe in Innsbruck (1994 – 1999). From 1999 onwards, she studied English & American Studies and General Linguistics at the Leopold-Franzens-University in Innsbruck. During her studies she spent one term (September 2002 – January 2003) at the Nottingham Trent University, Great Britain, as an Erasmus Exchange student, and three months (June – August 2004) at the University of Winnipeg, Canada, to conduct empirical research for her Magister thesis. In January 2005 she graduated with the thesis *Who is Afraid of Fear Appeals? Persuasion and Emotion in Print Advertising*. The work was published in the *Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft* (Sonderheft 123) in 2005. After graduation she worked as a Research Associate at Forrester in Amsterdam, Netherlands (May 2005 – December 2006) and subsequently as an Editor at Commetric in Sofia, Bulgaria (March 2007 – July 2008). In September 2008 she started her position as a scholarship holder of the Swiss National Science Foundation PhD-programme “Pro\*Doc: Language as social and cultural practice” at the English Department at the University of Zurich and began her research for the present PhD thesis. During her time at the English Department she also worked as an instructor, teaching the BA seminar “Introduction to Linguistics I & II” and as an interim assistant under Prof. Dr. Marianne Hundt. She finished her PhD thesis in 2012 under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Andreas H. Jucker and Prof. Dr. Miriam A. Locher.